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By

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BY

WENONA GILMAN, pseud.
Schoeffel, F.B.

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My Little Princess.—" Laurel Series."

MY LITTLE PRINCESS.

CHAPTER I.

THE windows were open, and the draft occasioned by the passage of air from the fan-light over the door commingling with the circulation through the casement, touched agreeably the brow of a young man who sat, with palette, brushes, and maul-stick, gazing critically upon a portrait which rested on the easel before him.

The sun through the sky-light made the heat of the room rather greater than it otherwise would have been. But Ballard Hilliard worked on as diligently as if his daily bread depended upon the rapidity of the strokes of his skillfully wielded brush. Not that it did, you know, for the clever young artist was one of those favorites of the gods who seemed to have reached the rainbow and its consequent bags of gold without the smallest effort on his own part.

His brother artists sighed enviously.

"Not but what he deserves his success, you understand," they would explain to each other; "but if he were a poor devil without a dollar with which to bless himself, the world would not take such pains to discover this remarkable talent of which they now seem so proud."

But Ballard Hilliard paid no attention either to their remarks or his own success. He loved art for art's sake, and he slaved and toiled early and late—not for the number of ducats that resulted therefrom, but the glow of an

ideality lightened and brightened his life. He had before him a grand ambition, and toward that goal every act of his life was to him a step. He wanted to be great, and to know that he deserved his greatness. He wanted no fame purchased by his social position and the wealth that had come to him as an inheritance through generations. He wanted not the glory of a day. He had no desire for that short-lived notoriety that made him the lion of the hour. He wanted his name to go down to posterity. He wanted to feel within himself that future generations would know him even better than his contemporaries had done. And he deceived himself in nothing. He was his own severest critic. He spared himself in nothing. He grieved over his failures and delighted in his successes as a mother does over her best-loved child.

And that was the passion of his soul. He was living in dreams of the future.

He was thinking of that, perhaps, as he sat there upon that golden day in June, gazing at the ideal head upon the canvas, when a light, quick knock sounded upon the door. In answer to a rather impatient "Come in!" the door opened, and a small figure, bearing a basket laden with flowers, entered.

It was a tiny, piquant face, with a singular perfection of feature that touched his artist soul with a sudden thrill. She was small, almost childish in appearance; but there was a roundness, a willowy grace to her form that he had never seen equaled, and as she stood there in the center of the floor, holding her basket up for his inspection, her exquisite face dimpling with a smile that seemed to be all in her eyes, though the dimples were near her mouth, he gazed in silence as he might have done at some masterpiece of art that touched and thrilled the lost chord of his inner self.

"Want some flowers?" she asked, with an almost boyish intonation of speech and audacity.

Her voice was musical, in exact accord with her appearance, and the very slanginess of her manner seemed to sit well upon her piquant self. Ballard Hilliard's magnificent dark eyes softened as they rested upon her.

"Are you selling them?" he asked, scarcely conscious of what he was saying.

"You don't suppose I am giving them away, do you?" she questioned, saucily. "When I go to Bloomingdale it will be as an attendant and not as a lunatic, and don't you forget it! Want to buy?"

"Perhaps. Where do you live?"

"Avenue B, top flat, tenement row. Would you like to know the number? If you will call, there might be something to interest your artisic eye there in the shape of Persian portières, Sèvres china, and Guido's masterpiece. We got the last named for returned tea tickets. As my mother always teaches me to be entirely truthful, I had better add that it is not the original, but a copy. Would you like to know the brand of tea that they give them with?"

"Thanks—no. I never drink tea," returned Hilliard, with perfect earnestness.

"You miss half the good of life," she said, with a grin. Then, turning to a stand of fading flowers: "That's about the best picture you've got here, isn't it? That is one thing that none of you fellows can do—you can't get over nature."

"I quite agree with you," he replied, studying admiringly the changes in her lovely countenance. "Did you ever have your portrait painted, little one?"

"Pooh—no! One or two of the fellows have asked me, but I want no one to do that who is not a worthy successor of Rembrandt or Raphael. Perhaps Titian could do best, for he could catch the light in my hair that the others would fail upon. I think it would make me so seasick that I should never recover if I were to see chromos of myself

like those I have seen of some ladies of society. I have been around artists' studios more or less all my life, and after the shocks I have received, I have schooled myself not to see the contents of their work-rooms at all."

"Are you so good a judge?"

"Well, perhaps not in an artistic way, you understand; but I have absorbed a sort of knowledge of things in general regarding art that I couldn't have escaped if I had tried. It had to come to me, like the measles and chicken-pox come to more fortunate children. I don't know anything else."

"Do you come from a family of artists, then?"

"Yes. My grandfather was Roderick Millbourne. My father was Donald Millbourne."

The names she had mentioned were so well known in the art world that Ballard Hilliard sprung to his feet.

"You don't mean it?" he cried. "Why, my prize possession is a painting by Roderick Millbourne! They were the greatest artists— But, pardon me, how—"

He could not complete his sentence, but stopped in considerable embarrassment.

"How does it come that I am selling flowers in the streets?" she said, quietly, though a trifle bitterly, finishing his sentence for him. "Do you remember the old quotation from 'Pinafore:' 'Things are seldom what they seem'? It has been so in our case. You know my father's misfortune. The whole world knew it. What he made one day he spent for rum the next. The picture-dealers got the money that rightfully belonged to him, and nobody ever found out that he was great until after he was dead and my poor mother a pauper."

Hilliard tried to find something to say, but somehow he felt tongue-tied in presence of that tiny flower-girl who stood there before him like a small princess in disguise. He could not express his sympathy for her in words, but

there was a note in his voice far more eloquent when he said:

"And your mother. Does she live?"

"Yes," answered the girl, her great eyes sadly roving to the window, her lip quivering under an emotion that she was striving to conceal. "She lives, but— Don't make me speak of it, sir. My mother is dying as rapidly as a woman can who is on her feet from morning until night. She won't give up, and some night—"

She did not finish her sentence, but turned suddenly and was walking rapidly toward the door, when Hilliard caught her by the arm.

"You must not go—at least, not yet," he cried, his own voice trembling as he saw the white anguish of her face. "I admired the work of your grandfather and of your father as I have done that of no modern artist. You must let me come and see your mother for your father's sake. You must—"

"No, you can't do that. She is very proud. She does not know that I sell flowers, and it would break her heart if she did. She thinks that I am in a private office in one of the dry-goods stores; but I lost my position there, and did not dare to tell her for fear the shock would kill her. We are very poor. There is an old blind florist that has a place not far from our house, and I sell for him. We divide the profits, and she knows nothing of it. I think it would kill her outright if she knew I am in the streets all day. I have sold them for a year now, and she has never suspected. I have my regular customers—and it pays better, much better, than the store. But she is growing weaker every day. There is not a night that I go home that I can not see the change the day has brought. Oh, sir, I try to be brave, but it is breaking my heart!"

"Poor child! Poor little one!" whispered Hilliard, more touched than he remembered ever to have been before. "How strangely hard life is for some, and so easy

—so easy for others who could better bear the trials. But you must let me come to see her—your mother, you know. You must let me, for your father's sake, you understand. Come, look here! You see I am not a bad artist, as modern ones go. Look at this. I am going to ask your mother's consent to paint your portrait."

He had turned her around and led her toward the canvas, which, though incomplete, showed the superb talent of the painter. Her face brightened, as if under the influence of sunshine.

"Oh, I say, did you do that?" she cried, in such genuine surprise and admiration that he laughed outright.

"Yes," he answered.

She did not speak for many minutes, but stood there apparently drinking in the work of art in supreme delight.

"Your drawing, your coloring, your technique, your style are perfect!" she cried, at last, with suppressed enthusiasm. "Ah, you work from love! It is there in every sweep of the brush. Your fame is a dowry from Heaven. An unfinished portrait such as that, even if you were to die to-night, would be a monument that would perpetuate your name through all the ages."

Hilliard's face flushed as he listened. All his life he had received praise, but none had gone to his heart like that.

"Who is she?" asked the girl, nodding at the canvas. "She is the most beautiful woman I ever saw!"

"She is an ideal. I thought her beautiful, too, until I saw you. Pardon me; I didn't wish to be rude. I may surely admire the work of God even as you admire mine. Not to the woman, but the artistic model, I say that you are the most exquisite piece of molding that I have ever seen. For the sake of art, let me paint you. You have the soul of an artist. It is born in you. I beg it as a favor—for the sake of the beloved mistress of both our hearts, let me paint you!"

She put out her hand and raised her eyes now humid with tears.

"It shall be my humble contribution to your future greatness," she said, softly.

She did it for love of art. Is it God who rules events such as that? Can it be that He, who doeth all things rightly and well, writes in the book of predestination a situation such as that, with the awful future veiled?

CHAPTER II.

"CARROLL!"

There was a rather heavy brush between Ballard Hilliard's teeth, which thickened his articulation a trifle, but not sufficiently to make the word misunderstood. His eyes were fixed upon the portrait and not the model. She heard, but waited for him to continue. He repeated:

"Carroll!"

"H'm!"

"Are you tired?"

"Dead tired! My neck is cramped and both arms are fast asleep."

"Let us rest awhile. My fingers are paralyzed from holding this palette."

"That is why you thought of my fatigue, I suppose."

He laughed as he laid his brushes and palette away.

She came up behind him and leaned over his chair, catching her breath in a little gasp of surprise.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You are idealizing again. I thought you were going to paint me as I am."

"I am. I have. One can not improve upon the idealization of God. I could not paint you as beautiful as you are without an inspiration from Heaven."

He spoke with suppressed enthusiasm, as he always did when her beauty was referred to. The speech was followed by an embarrassed silence on the part of Carroll Mill-

bourne. Hilliard observed it, and wishing to relieve her, exclaimed, briskly:

"Look at that!" holding up his middle finger for her inspection. "I did not feel it while I was at work, but see how the brushes have pinched my finger. They usually callous it and make it sore, but this is a regular blood-blister."

"Let me open it from the under side," said Carroll, turning in a business-like way from the contemplation of her own pictured, poetical beauty to the most prosaic matter of relieving a blood-blister. "Where are your needles? Ah, here!"

She selected one, and kneeling beside him, took his hand in hers. As she bent her pretty head above it, a slow flush mounted from Ballard Hilliard's throat to his brow. A soft light burned in his superb eyes, such as no woman had been able to call there before. A smile trembled upon the corner of his finely cut mouth, and for the first time in his life he realized that love of a woman was master of love of art; that there was something besides a canvas and brushes in the world; that the human heart was the perfected work of God, and that his had been played upon by the great Guiding Hand.

He forgot all else than that. He cared to remember nothing. He knew that he loved the girl who was there so closely beside him, with his hand clasped in hers almost tenderly, and—

He did not complete the thought, for she had lifted her head, and was about to rise.

"There!" she exclaimed. "I don't think you will have any more trouble with that. You are ruining your hands."

He watched her rise as one watches a sunbeam go. He looked at her hungrily, yearningly, for a moment; then he too arose, with a sigh smothered in his heart, and rapidly

walked the floor with bent head, evidently thinking deeply, unhappily.

The mental conflict had whitened his lips and drawn his brows; but Carroll did not see. Something in his manner had made her nervous, though she could scarcely have told what, and she had turned to his desk, upon which were scattered numerous etchings and photographs in artistic negligence. She was turning them over carelessly, almost without seeing them, when he approached and stood beside her for some seconds in silence. He was not looking at her, but down at the tiny brown hands that were fluttering in and out among the pictures; and his thoughts were away as well.

He was thinking of the woman who held his promise of marriage—thinking of how little she knew the meaning of love compared with this grand passion that he felt for this flower-girl with her artist's soul. He was wondering if honor was the rivet in a loveless bond, or if honor did not compel him to break it. And then Carroll glanced up with a smile, and he met her eye.

The work was done.

He forgot that other woman to whom his pledge belonged. His passion had crept from his heart to his head and entangled his brain. He leaned forward and slipped his arm about the girl, drawing her to his breast.

"Carroll," he whispered, "are you too much an angel to know the meaning of love?"

His arm held her; his hand pressed her cheek down upon his bosom. She did not reply, but lay there trembling, with downcast eyes and flushed face, making no endeavor to release herself.

"Sweetheart," he whispered again, "look at me! Have I frightened you? Forgive me! The strength of my love is so great that I can control it no longer! Have you not seen how it was with me? Could you not read all the struggle in my heart? Ah, Carroll, speak to me!"

She lifted her eyes, a smile of heavenly happiness in their depths.

"What is there to say?" she asked.

"That you love me!"

"Would you know it better then than now? Can you not feel it?"

Hilliard smiled—a little, staggering sort of effort.

"I want to hear you say it," he answered, tenderly. "I want to know it from your lips. My darling—darling, if you knew how my love has mastered me! It is the one thought of my heart—the strongest emotion of my soul! Carroll, answer me!"

She lifted herself in his arms just a trifle, and smiled up at him with almost delirious ecstasy.

"You want my lips to speak the words that my heart has said to you a thousand times?" she questioned, happily. "I love you! Is it enough?"

"Yes, if love means to you what it does to me. I have never loved before, and I have lived much longer than you. Oh, dearest heart! there is such sweetness, such joy in holding you in my arms and knowing that your life is mine!"

"And it is—all yours!"

He bent his head and kissed her—a long, passionate embrace that contained nothing of impurity, nothing that could tarnish her perfect chastity

He was striving to control his emotion as much as possible, lest he alarm her; but it required a tremendous effort. His entire self seemed submerged in the overwhelming desire to have her for his own. Great passions come to great natures suddenly, and his left no room for any other thought.

For some time there was silence between them, when each seemed listening to the beat of the other's heart; then, with his lips upon her own, Hilliard whispered:

"When will you be my wife, my own?"

"Not yet," she answered. "You must wait. Not long, you know; but until my mother is better."

"It must be soon. There are so many things that I have to tell you; but just at first I want to feel the sweetness of your love without thinking of the past. You trust me, do you not, Carroll?"

"Absolutely!"

"And yet there are some things in my life which you must know—some things which you must hear from me alone. If I could only make my life a clean page like yours, for your sake, my love, I should be so glad—so glad!"

"I am satisfied with you as you are. If you were different in one thing, my love would, of necessity, be less. Oh, how can you, so great, so grand, care for an insignificant creature such as I?"

"There is no woman under God's sun to compare with you. Your beauty never has and never will be reproduced. Your purity is as great as that of an angel. Your soul is that of an artist. Does mortality go beyond that? Dearest love, if I were but worthy of you, my happiness would be too complete!"

"Hush! I am half afraid of my own joy. There has been so little of sunshine in my life that it seems to me that the cloud must come while I am basking in the delicious warmth. I have felt that you cared, yet I dared not frame the thought."

"You are the one and only love of my life, my own; yet there are things that you must know."

"No. I am more than satisfied with that. Let the rest go. What is your past to me? It is the future that is mine and God's."

He kissed her once again with reverent devotion.

"And God deal with me according to my fidelity to you!" he said, slowly, the flush of ideal passion upon his cheek.

CHAPTER III.

THREE months lay in the dead past, for happiness and beauty and love must die, even as misery and hatred are included in dissolution. The months lay dead, yet unburied, still held under the caress of memory.

How happy those two were, Carroll and Ballard Hilliard! Life to them was like the sun in the midday sky. They saw nothing but each other, heard nothing but each other, wanted nothing but each other. They spoke to each other in sighs, in glances, and caresses. They adored each other, content in silence.

The portrait progressed slowly. To Hilliard, Carroll seemed to grow more beautiful with each hour, and where at first he had been satisfied with his work he now found flaws—defects that no care or pains could erase.

"You are too beautiful for any but a god to paint, my little princess!" he often said to her. "I must give it up. If you were dead, and I saw you only by the light of memory, I could do it then, and the world would call me famous, but never while you are before me. I see too clearly then how short I fall of the perfection of the original, and the failure disheartens me. I must be satisfied with the possession of the fairest flower of the universe, even if I can not make it live for future ages."

But still the sittings continued. Each day he scarcely seemed to live until he heard her well-known tap upon the door; then heaven opened.

"When are these partings to end, my little princess?" he said to her one day as she was leaving him. "When are you to become my wife before all the world?"

"Soon, Ballard," she answered, with that upward glance that expressed her love so well. "Not quite yet. I am foolish, but the thought of change hurts me. Wait

until my mother is better. Then, dear heart— Shall we be so happy—after?"

"Does it make you happy to go from me? It will be an eternal union!"

She looked at him without replying. There was a long caress, so deep, so tender, so true. What is there left in life to one who has tasted so much of bliss?

She went out into the early gloaming of that still September day, her heart light under its flutterings of love. There was a song in her soul—a song of gratitude to God for the richness of His blessing. She noticed nothing of the busy, bustling world about her. She paid no heed to where she was going, but walked more by instinct—from habit—than from any sight that directed her. Her thoughts were filled with him whom she had left behind. When she came to her poor home she paused and sighed.

Was not there something in contrast? Would life be the same to her when she had left that wretched place forever? At least there was happiness with Ballard Hilliard, wherever she might be. Comforted by that thought, she mounted the long, steep flight of stairs, and very softly opened the door.

Instead of the pale face of her mother that had always greeted her, she was met by a lady charmingly though simply attired, her pure, noble, high-bred face wearing an anxious look. She had removed her hat and gloves, the jewels upon her hands looking strangely out of place in that poorly furnished room.

"You, Miss Kingman—and at this hour!" exclaimed Carroll, her face growing pale under an intangible fear. "Has anything happened?"

Before replying, Geraldine Kingman took the beautiful face between her hands and kissed it.

"I hope nothing serious, Mignonne," she answered, gently. "I called to-day to see your mother, knowing that she had not been well of late, and I found her more

ill than I thought. I persuaded her to go to bed and summoned a doctor."

"And now?" gasped Carroll.

"She has not been well, you know. The doctor says—"

"What?"

"Don't be frightened, Mignonne. It is so difficult to tell in these early stages, and he may be mistaken, after all."

"But he said—"

"Something about—small-pox."

"My God!"

The girl staggered back; but the tender arms of the woman of society supported her, leading her to a chair near by.

"You need your strength, dear child; and she needs you, too. She has called for you so often—so often during the last two hours."

Carroll colored painfully as she remembered where she had been, forgetful of all save her own selfish joy, her own boundless love. Then the thought of Miss Kingman's danger came to her.

"Great heavens!" she cried, starting up in wild horror; "you should not be here. Oh! why have you remained? Why did you not go when he told you the hideousness of it all? Have you forgotten? Don't you remember the frightful—"

She seemed unable to continue, and Miss Kingman smiled.

"I am not afraid, dearest," she said, soothingly. "If one's friends think of self in moments like this, where would the charity of the world be? The terrible epidemic is raging, Carroll; you will not, therefore, find many that will stand by you now. Every one is afraid. You must not let any one suspect in the house. We are doing everything possible to prevent the disease getting through the

house in the event of its proving what we fear. You understand? I have persuaded the doctor that it will not be necessary to send her away until—until we know beyond a doubt."

"Away! Where?"

"There are places, you know—"

"You mean the pest-house?"

Miss Kingman did not reply.

"Great—"

"Hush!" she whispered. "Did I not tell you that I had persuaded the doctor not to send her?"

"Not until he knows."

"But he will never know until she is well, or— Carroll, you are very beautiful, child. Would you—"

But the girl seemed to divine what her friend, or more than friend, would say, and with a gesture of horror she put out her hand.

"Don't say it!" she cried. "Don't think me so vile! Have I been neglectful of her? Forgive me—forgive me! I love her—oh, how I love her! It will kill me if—"

"But it won't come to that!" interrupted Miss Kingman. "We won't allow it to come to that. I am going to remain, you know—all the time, you understand. We will nurse her, you and I, night and day. We will save her; and after that her health will be better than ever, for it clears the system, this disease, and after it one is always so well."

As she listened to the kind voice trying to cheer her, Carroll's courage gave way, and leaning her head upon her friend's shoulder, she burst into bitter tears.

"You are the best friend a woman ever had," she said to Geraldine, when her tears had ceased to flow. "One would know how to give up life—more than that—love, for you. Some time I shall find a way to repay you."

Then she went to her mother.

The next morning she got a boy to take a note to Ballard Hilliard. It was brief.

"LOVE,—Do not expect me until you hear again. My mother is ill—dying, perhaps. I dare not tell even you what is wrong. Do not come. I do not ask, but command it. Trust me. With my heart,

"Your own
"CARROLL."

And then these two—the society queen and the flower-girl—went on with their work, nursing that frail form back to life again. And, ah, what weary work it was! As they knelt beside the bed one night, watching the poor face, Carroll took the noble one of her friend between her hands.

"Think"—she exclaimed, with dull anguish—"think of your face being like that! Think of the hideous mark each one of those awful postules will leave. Have you no thought of self? Are you an angel?"

Miss Kingman smiled.

"Only a woman," she answered, gently. "Is not that enough? Must a woman be always a vain coward? Dearest little one, I told you once that if you ever needed a friend you should call upon me. You see, I found it out for myself, and the friend is here."

"God bless you!"

And so the days lengthened and vanished, a week came and went; then the doctors told them one morning that Mrs. Millbourne would live. It came almost with a greater shock to Carroll than had the knowledge of her illness, for she had almost despaired; but when she could choke her heart into subjection she turned, with the tears streaming over her face, and threw her arms about Miss Kingman's neck.

"What do I not owe you?" she cried. "You have saved her—my dear, dear mother! I owe her life to you

—it is worth more than mine, much more. Without you I could have done nothing—nothing! Thank God, thank you—my noble, noblest friend!"

CHAPTER IV.

THEY were seated in the conservatory, beautifully, artistically filled with tropical plants, those two—Carroll Millbourne and Geraldine Kingman. It was the home of the latter, magnificent in its combinations of modern comfort and antique loveliness—a fit setting for a gem so rare as Geraldine Kingman.

She was not beautiful, in so far as regularity of feature constitutes beauty; but there was a grace of carriage, a nobility of bearing, a *grande-dame* manner that far surpassed all that. She was as generous as nature, as true as death, and there was something about her that seemed to tell it to you in a language that was unmistakable. To Carroll she combined all the virtues, with none of the vices, of the goddesses of old. She worshiped her. She felt herself capable of any heroic sacrifice for the sake of her friend, and Geraldine Kingman, the darling of society, returned the flower-girl's affection.

It was the first time that Carroll had left her mother after the long and painful illness that had confined her for so tedious a time, and a smile of hope and happiness rested upon the charming lips that Miss Kingman kissed.

"It seems as if she were really well, to see you, little one," Miss Kingman said, tenderly. "It was good of you to come to me first, Mignonne."

"And where should I have gone first if not to you?" asked Carroll, pressing the hand she held, while long-repressed tears filled her eyes. "What friend have I so good, so true as you? Did ever a woman live so self-forgetful, so noble, so—"

"There—there!" interrupted Miss Kingman, with a

light, happy laugh. "Why, you would make me so vain, child, that my closest friend would find disgust for me instead of affection."

"I should like to tell the whole world what you have done for me!"

"And I should be bitterly offended if you did. I have no desire to pose as a heroine, Carroll. I am a very happy woman, little one, and it is my greatest pleasure to show my gratitude to God for His goodness to me, who deserve it so little, by any work that comes in my way, by any little deed of kindness to a fellow-creature. I don't want thanks; I don't want advertisement to the world. I only desire the approval of my own conscience, which contains the approbation of Heaven. Do you think that the bravos of the world could make me happier than I am?"

Carroll glanced admiringly about her.

"You have everything to make life beautiful," she said, softly.

An expression such as she had never seen upon it before crossed Miss Kingman's face. It seemed to be illuminated with a holy, a divine love, such as dawns but once in life, and hovers then upon the soul but a moment, too dear and too sweet even to be held by the breath of the heart.

"And yet you see so little of what I really have," she answered, a tender throb in her voice. "Ah, if I could only tell you! Did you ever realize, Carroll, that there is something in life that goes beyond expression? Did you ever think that there is one emotion in life that the tenderest word will wound? Ah, child, you will never have lived until you have loved!"

Carroll dropped upon her knees, her hands holding those that rested upon Miss Kingman's lap, her glowing eyes raised.

"And you have loved like that?" she whispered.

"Like what? Have I said anything—expressed anything? How little it was; how short of the reality! Surely there must be some word beyond love to express it! It is so weak, so impotent! And yet there can be none, for God is love, and there is nothing beyond Him. But you can't understand, and I can't explain. He is a god—so handsome, so chivalrous, so noble! I wish I could tell you. But there are no words. I seem to be like a tiny child groping in the wilderness of its little heart for a word that it has never learned to utter to express a thought that is pressing upon its tender soul. Ah, love is my heart, my soul! Carroll, listen. Can you realize what it is to love so that one would die denied the love that has become more than life?"

She was looking so earnestly, so scrutinizingly at the girl at her feet that the lovely face fell.

Could she, Carroll Millbourne, understand a life like that—she who had known Ballard Hilliard? She almost laughed aloud at the thought. Then, very slowly, she lifted her head, until her lips touched those of her friend.

"I can understand," she whispered, "for I too love and am loved!"

A close, warm embrace followed; then Carroll sat there upon the floor with her exquisite reddish-gold head upon Miss Kingman's knee, the long, slim fingers of the woman of fashion flashing in and out of the sunny rings. There was a dreamy smile upon the lips of each. They spoke little. There seemed to be nothing to say. Then Miss Kingman leaned over and touched her friend's cheek.

"And this man who has won your heart," she said, softly—"what of him, my little Carroll? Does he love you as you deserve?"

"More! He adores me as I worship him."

"How happy we both are! God bless you, dear. And we love each other, do we not, Carroll?"

"So much!" answered the girl, looking up contentedly.

"You gave me my mother's life, and besides that, there is a bond of sympathy between us now that no time can ever destroy. If I were sure of the granting of any favor that I should ask of God, it would be that He should give me some way to prove my devotion to you, my more than friend. Don't tell me that it is foolish. I know it but too well. Yet there is something in my heart that tells me—"

"What?"

"I don't know. I can't quite understand. But it is coming, coming! Dearest, kiss me once again."

When the head was raised from the requested caress, a servant stood there.

"A gentleman is in the drawing-room, Miss Kingman," she said, quietly.

Then, when she had gone, Geraldine sprung up. The matronliness had left her face. She was suddenly the blushing, thrilling girl aware of the presence of her lover. She pressed another quick kiss upon Carroll's brow.

"It is he," she whispered—"he of whom I told you! Wait for me here. He never remains long when he calls at this hour. He is a great artist, Carroll, and his work divides his heart with me."

She was gone before Carroll could reply; but the girl sat still upon the floor, looking after her with that same lazy, tender smile.

"A great artist!" she whispered to herself. "I wonder what he is like? Oh, he ought to be a wonderful man that could win a heart like hers! How good and great of soul she is! I should like to see what manner of man could win such love from a woman like Geraldine Kingman. I wonder if he too paints portraits, or if he only does animals or landscapes? I should like to see him. I wonder if there would be any harm in my just taking a single glance at him? I am sure she would not mind, or she would not have told me of her love. I should be so proud to have

her see Ballard, and I am quite sure— Just one little glance. Dear Miss Kingman, how much I owe her, and how much I love her!"

She crept up and advanced noiselessly. The conservatory was separated from the drawing-room by a small reception-room and a heavy portière. Silently she stepped through. The portière was drawn a trifle aside. Miss Kingman had evidently stopped for something on the way, for she was just entering the room from an opposite door. A tall, manly form rose to greet her. Carroll saw only the back, yet her heart seemed to cease its beating.

With graceful step he went forward. The sweet, blushing face was raised for the kiss that fell only upon the brow.

Ah! surely, dear God, that was not the kiss of a lover! A brother might have implanted it there, but never the man to whose keeping a girl has given her very soul.

Carroll had grown white as death. Her limbs were rigid. She tried to move, but she seemed chained to the spot. She would have fled, if only the power had been given her, from—she knew not what. But she could not. Every drop of blood in her veins seemed stagnated, yet her senses were peculiarly alive.

She saw with horror the same deathless adoration that had gleamed in those pure eyes a few brief moments before—that devotion that had filled her with admiration, yet now paralyzed her with terror. Then the two turned. Her very soul died in that instant. What kept back the mad anguish that burst through every fiber of her being? What prevented the wild groan of the broken heart? What hushed the death-gurgle in the throat of love? Only God knew.

She stood there motionless as a statue, dead to every sensation that the human breast can know. For the man before her was Ballard Hilliard!

In those words lay the death-warrant—not that alone;

it was the crucifixion of a heart. She felt it die as emotion died. Then very slowly she turned, stricken dumb and blind, and crept away.

She felt nothing, thought nothing. She was dead, and the world was dead, and even God had died when the warmth had left the sun.

It was Ballard Hilliard whom Geraldine Kingman loved —whom Geraldine Kingman had said was more to her than her life! And what was it that Geraldine Kingman was to her? She had forgotten.

There was no hat upon her head, no scarf about her throat as she crept from the house. She had forgotten.

But suddenly—what was it? Has a thought power to lift dissolution?—something penetrated through the awful density upon her brain—a remembrance so horrible that it seemed to set her flesh on fire. She put her hands up to her poor, ghastly face; but the hideousness of her terror was too great even to admit a groan. How dared she face that awful knowledge? She had known it herself less than a week. She had meant to tell him that very day—he who would so soon have been her husband; yet now—God of heaven! what was she to do?

The river seemed the only haven open to her. Would not Heaven find an excuse for her in the burden that had so suddenly—oh, God! how piteously sudden!—grown too heavy for her to bear?

The knowledge that her friend loved him was surely enough; but this other thing—this hideous secret that now she dared not tell, weighed upon her soul with a heaviness greater than death!

CHAPTER V.

No thought of blame or censure entered Carroll's heart toward the man whom she loved.

She seemed, with that intuitive perception which is a

woman's dower right, to understand without a syllable of explanation the situation in which Ballard Hilliard was placed, but the comprehension helped her extremity not in the least. The circumstances which surrounded her were, to a woman of her natural refinement of birth and breeding—for no poverty can alienate inborn mental delicacy—a source of anguish too great for either words or thought. She knew that something must be done. But what?—but what?

The day was deliciously warm, fanned by a breeze that was balmy as spring. A curious indolence seemed to rest over nature, that imparted a feeling to her sensitive soul which she could not have analyzed even had she tried.

The leaves in the park were turning to crimson and gold, and through them she walked onward, down to the lake that rippled so silently and peacefully on its monotonous way. She sat down, hidden by the still thick foliage of the shrubbery, and lifted her aching eyes to the clear blue of the sky.

The frightful pain of that awakening thought was still stabbing through the paralysis upon her brain and heart with hideous insistence. What was she to do? She asked the question of God, yet the voice of Heaven was silent.

Was she suffering for sin committed? Who shall answer?

She knew that Ballard Hilliard would marry her if she would permit it; but then what of Geraldine Kingman, that woman to whom she owed more than her life?

"I can't! I can't!" she groaned, at last, to that voiceless sun that answers but the command of God. "Lord, I have prayed for some way to show her my gratitude. Is this the answer to my prayer? What right have I to take from her her lover? He was hers before he was mine. Oh, Father in heaven, help me! Am I to give my honor in exchange for my mother's life? Am I? It is too bitter! Yet the sin, the shame is mine already. It was hid-

den from me then under the greatness of my love, but I see it now cruelly clear. Shall I save myself at the cost of the happiness of the noble woman who risked more than her life for me and mine? Never! At any cost—at any cost I shall do my duty! God help me to be brave!"

She bowed her head and groaned, such a groan as would have touched the heart of a satyr. No tears came to relieve her. She fought out her horrible battle, with the lake, the sun, and the silent face of heaven to witness—fought her battle to victory; but the field was marked with the blood-stain of a dead heart. You who are mothers can best understand.

Then she rose, her numb, stiff limbs feeling like wooden things beneath her, and walked slowly out of the park. Her poor white face was set and pitiful, but as emotionless as cold, pale snow. With mechanical correctness she hailed a car, got in, paid her fare, and rode down-town. People looked at her curiously, for she was hatless, and there was a look upon her face that riveted attention; but she apparently saw nothing. She got out of the car at the proper crossing and entered the hotel where Ballard Hilliard had his studio.

She entered the hall and passed silently down toward the door of the room where she had been so madly happy, almost forgetful of those old days in the dear, dead past, so curiously close, yet so strangely long ago. She heard his voice singing, that rich, full barytone that she had so admired in the days that were dead, and paused until he had finished:

"I need no stars in heaven to guide me,
I need no sun or moon to shine,
While I have you, sweetheart, beside me,
While I know that thou art mine."

There was not a sob in her throat, not a tear dimmed her eye as she heard the little love song, knowing so well

that it was of her he was thinking, and without a knock she opened the door and entered.

He was sitting before the easel, and did not hear her until she stood beside him; then he threw down his maulstick and sprung up.

"How long you have been away, love!" he cried.

And then he saw her face.

A little, quickly strangled cry escaped him. He grew white to the lips and staggered back without touching her.

"Carroll!" he whispered.

She did not reply. He caught the back of the chair for support, and after a moment recovered himself.

"Carroll," he repeated, "what has happened? Your mother—"

"Is well," she answered, wearily, raising her hand to lift the little damp curls from her brow.

"But you? What in Heaven's name has happened? Speak to me! I am—frightened."

"What shall I say?" she questioned, slowly. "What is there that one can say? What has happened? I don't know. That is—I don't know at all. I have come to say good-bye to you, Ballard."

"Good-bye?"

"Yes—eternally!"

He looked silently at her for a moment, as if doubting her sanity; but there was too much still death in her eyes for him to think of that.

"What is it that you mean?" he asked, hoarsely. "I don't seem to understand. Am I dreaming, or are you mad?"

"Would to God it were one of the two," she answered, in a passionless way; "but it is neither."

"You wish me to understand that our love is at an end?"

"Our sin, Ballard."

"Sin?"

"Oh, don't! It is so hard. Dear, don't think I doubt you. To doubt Heaven would be as possible as that. Ballard, Ballard, why did you not tell me, darling? Why did you not let me know before?"

There was no emotion in her questions. It would have been a thousand times easier if there had been.

He shivered.

"Speak out, for God's sake!" he cried, heavily. "What is it that you mean?"

"About Geraldine Kingman," she answered, slowly.

A crimson flush crossed cheek and brow, yet there was an expression of intense relief in his countenance.

"I have been a great coward, Carroll," he returned, in a shamed voice. "Desire to avoid giving pain has always been the weakness of my character; but you will forgive me that, will you not, my little princess? I will go at once and—"

She stopped him with a gesture.

"There is no forgiveness between you and me," she said, huskily. "I have loved you; if my heart were not quite dead, I should love you still with a great love that is beyond earth, but I see now how I have sinned. Do you know what punishment Heaven has sent me for that sin?"

She paused, looking at him with those great, blank eyes that bewildered him. He dared not reply.

"God demands that I give you up—that I see you no more. Hush!"—as he was about to speak—"wait. Do you know who came to us when we were deserted by the whole world? Geraldine Kingman. Do you know who held my father's hand and soothed his last days on earth, giving him the comforts that our poverty would have denied us the power of doing? Geraldine Kingman. Do you know who kept my mother from the poor-house and me from being a beggar? Geraldine Kingman. Do you know to whom I owe my mother's life in this last terrible affliction that was sent upon us? Geraldine Kingman.

Do you know to whom I owe the fact that my mother does not lie in Potter's Field to-day, sent there from the pest-house? To Geraldine Kingman."

Her voice died away in a whisper. Ballard Hilliard had grown paler and paler as she was speaking. He had not known Carroll all these long, happy months without discovering something of the strength of her character, and as she continued, the whole situation was before him as clearly as she could have put it by the loudest lamentations.

He knew that her sense of duty, mistaken though it might be, had been aroused, and he knew that he had lost her.

He could not have spoken if his life had depended upon it. There was a silence between them that was horrible; then, with a long, weary sigh, she continued.

"I see that you understand, and that you agree with me that we must part."

"But I don't!" he cried, passionately. "I don't, and I never shall. She is good and noble, it is true; but why should that fact spoil both your life and mine? I do not love her; so help me Heaven, I never have."

"But she is your promised wife."

"Through no fault of mine, I swear it! Listen, Carroll—"

"Please don't. It is so useless—so unutterably useless. She loves you. She held your promise before I had ever seen your face. That I should have stolen your heart from her is the very greatest wrong that I could have committed; but I shall wrong her no further. Oh! do you think I have not thought it all out? Do you think that I have not suffered until there is no heart left in my body to suffer more? Great God! Ten thousand deaths by slowest torture could never equal the anguish that I have endured! Do not make me suffer more than I have, Ballard. Say farewell to me, dear, and let me go!"

"Never!"

"Then I must go without."

"I shall never let you."

She held up her hand, and by the expression of her face he knew that her resolve was deathless.

"You must!" she exclaimed, slowly. "My resolution is taken, and nothing can move me. It is my duty, the atonement that I must make for my sin. If you would spare me, go on and do your duty to her. It is the single demand that I make of you for your part in the great wrong that has been done. If you have any love in your heart for me, you will do this for my sake. It is the only thing in all this world that can bring me the slightest happiness. You see, I feel nothing. My heart is as dead as that face that lies beneath your brush upon the senseless canvas. It is an eternal farewell, Ballard, and if you have any pity you will try to have it for my sake!"

CHAPTER VI.

WHO shall describe the hideousness of the death in life that accompanies a broken heart? Surely not we who have seen it so many times in this cruel old world—seen it in the beamless eye, heard it in the changeless sigh, felt it in the cold, emotionless tones of the once joyous, care-free voice.

It was so with Carroll.

Do you think there was a moment in the day, an hour in the long, bitter night when she could close her heart to the knowledge of the frightful calamity that had come into her life? Weeks wore into months, until three had fled; but still she bore it helplessly—bore it with a shrinking sorrow that was piteous.

The letters of pleading that had come from Ballard Hilliard had grown too painful for her to read, and standing as she did in fear of her own courage, in face of an awful grief like hers—of a hideous secret that weighed down her

very soul, she dared not read them longer, but put them aside with the seal unbroken. She did not try to conquer her love. On the contrary, she lived upon the memory of it.

She avoided Miss Kingman for the first time within her remembrance, making an excuse whenever she knew that her old friend was coming to the house; and as the weeks went by it seemed to her mother that this evident fear of one whom she had so loved had become almost a mania.

"Carroll," she said to her one day, very gently, when this avoidance had become a trifle more marked than usual, "can you not see that you are giving pain to the woman who has been the best friend we have ever known? She wants very much that you should come to see her. Why will you not?"

A spasm of pain contracted the changed but still beautiful face.

"I can not!" she cried, huskily. "Don't ask it! I can not!"

The sweet, sad-eyed woman laid aside her sewing, and going to the side of her child knelt, there, winding her arms about the girl's waist.

"Dearest," she said, gently, "what has changed you so during the last few months? You are not like yourself at all. Can you not trust your mother? I have not spoken to you of it, hoping against hope that you would come to me; but I have waited until I can wait no longer. The silence is wearing me out. Hour after hour I have lain awake at night, conscious of the suffering you were enduring so silently, and it has almost broken my heart that you would not let me share it. Carroll, am I so little a part of your life that you can not trust me with your grief?"

The anguish of the girl's eyes was startling.

She endeavored to smile, but the effort was so palpable—so pitiable a failure—that it brought tears to the eyes of the faithful mother.

"You are distressing yourself about nothing, dearest," she answered, faintly. "You are seeing hobgoblins in dusk shadows, that is all. You have been ill for so long that it has affected you with a certain kind of melancholia."

"Do you think you can deceive me like that? Do you think there is anything that you can conceal from your mother?" cried the unhappy woman, drawing back from her. "Ah! child, it is something worse than I at first thought when you will try so weak a deception as that. Carroll, what is it?"

"Nothing."

"And you think I will believe you? Do you think I have suffered so little in my life that I can mistake it in another? And most particularly when that other is more to me than—almost more than my soul? Oh, Carroll, do you know how I love you? Have you ever considered how a mother adores her child?"

A hysterical sob rose to the girl's lips. With the greatest difficulty she choked it back, and laughed just a little wildly instead.

"Get up, dearest," she exclaimed, assisting her mother to a chair. "You are absolutely growing emotional, and all for nothing. Shall I tell you this great secret that you have been making such mountains of? Well, it is quite true that I have been afraid to tell you, and knowing how easily alarmed our dear friend, Miss Kingman, is, I have rather avoided her as well, for fear she would upset you with her fears. I am not well—that is all. I have been feeling unwell all fall, and perhaps I have not been quite like myself; but I did not think I had carried it so far as to make you think all the things you have. It is absolutely amusing. I have been too closely in-doors. Sewing does not agree with me. You see, I have become a regular nomad. Now put all your fears aside, for when I have recovered from this bilious attack I shall be as well as

ever. Ha! ha! it is funny, is it not? All this emotionalism and breaking of hearts begins and ends in a bilious attack. Curiously hard upon romance, is it not? Come, dear, let us talk of something more interesting than my very prosaic health. What do you think I heard to-day when I went to take Mrs. Langford's package home?"

"What?"

"Dora has come home."

"Dora Langford?"

"Yes."

"How dreadful!"

There was a momentary pause. The swift color had surged into Carroll's cheek; but Mrs. Millbourne did not see it, bending as she was above a piece of sewing.

"Why dreadful?" the girl asked, at last, in a voice that was hollow and choked.

"Why? How can you ask? I wonder that she ever had the courage after the terrible thing that she had done."

Another pause; then in a tone still more dense, still more awful, if only the mother's ears had been open to hear it:

"She had—loved."

"And—sinned."

Again that frightful sob was rising in Carroll's throat, but again she choked it back by a laugh so hard, so cold, that Mrs. Millbourne shivered.

"It is horrible!" she said, dully. "Ah! dearest, we can not understand love like that, can we? We come of a race too cold, too proud. Suppose—suppose—just to argue the case, you know—that you had ever loved—'not wisely, but too well'—and something—no matter what—had separated you from the man who had caused your shame, what would you have done?"

"Drowned myself," answered the woman.

"What?"

"Drowned myself. Do you think that there is anything in all the world that should tempt a chaste woman to bring that degradation upon herself? Do you think there is anything under God's heavens that would excuse her for bringing a shame like that upon her family? If Laura Langford had been a child of mine, I would gladly have given her to the waves rather than have the disgrace upon her that must ever attach to a wifeless mother!"

For a moment a wild agony burned in Carroll's eyes. It seemed that concealment of her hideous suffering was no longer possible; then she fell back in her chair, pale, almost exhausted under the strength of her own anguish. It was frightful! She lifted her sad eyes pleadingly to her mother's face; she opened her lips to speak, but the words died upon them. She wrung her hands helplessly. There was nothing that she could say—nothing—nothing!

"Now this is completed," exclaimed Mrs. Millbourne, in her most business-like tone, "I am going to send you with it at once. The walk will do you good. Put on your hat while I put up the parcel."

With a step that staggered, Carroll rose to obey.

There was an anguish at her heart that cut like a knife. She knew that her time had come—she knew that her day of grace was over.

She fastened on her hat, and turned to watch the pale woman's swift fingers as she tied the cord about the package. She knew that she was about to say to her an eternal farewell, and perhaps that knowledge was the bitterest one that had as yet come into her suffering life. Still there was not a tear in her eye.

"There it is," exclaimed Mrs. Millbourne, brightly. "Now take it, and be sure you go to call upon Miss Kingman before you return. You will do it, Carroll?"

"Yes," she answered, in a tone that her mother remembered long afterward; "I will call there before I return."

She took the bundle, then, laying it upon the table, placed her arms about her mother.

"Good-bye, dearest," she said, hoarsely, the dry, tearless gasp touching Mrs. Millbourne with quivering force—"good-bye, dearest! Have I pained you of late? I was a good daughter to you once, was I not?"

"Carroll, what are you saying?"

"I should like to hear you say it, dearest. It will be a comfort to me. I was a good daughter to you once, was I not?"

"You have always been a good daughter to me, my darling."

"Thank you for that so much—so much! Put your arms about my neck in the old fond way and kiss me, will you not? There is one thing about us, dearest, that never can die, and that is memory. I remember how you used to take me upon your knee and tell me how great a part a little child formed in its mother's life. You would never believe there could come a time in your life when— But what am I saying? Kiss me, mother, as you kissed me then, and let me go."

"How strangely you act, Carroll!"

"Don't think of it. I am ill and tired. Kiss me, dearest, and say 'God bless you,' as you did in those old days that are dead beyond resurrection."

"God bless you, my precious girl!"

And then the sob would be no longer repressed. It struggled up and rent the air, so filled with agony that Mrs. Millbourne cried out; but when she looked there was a smile upon her daughter's face.

"Thank you, dearest!" she whispered.

There was one long kiss, and then, without a backward glance, Carroll was gone—gone! Only God knows the pity of it all!

And there was no word spoken to call her back.

CHAPTER VII.

A SWIFT, wind-swept snow was bginning to fall that cut the face like a whip-lash. The wind whistled about the exposed corners of adjacent buildings, sometimes wildly, at other times dismally, like a human thing in distress. A terrible storm was breaking, and to it Mrs. Millbourne listened in dismay.

More than once she went to the window and, lifting it, looked down into the dark street where the few pedestrians were hurrying and scurrying in anxiety to reach the shelter of home, however poor a one it might be; but the great height made her dizzy, and the wind cut her until she drew back with an irrepressible shudder.

She glanced at the tiny clock upon the little mantel-shelf.

"Nine o'clock!" she said aloud, shivering as her voice broke the intense silence of the room. "Nine o'clock, and Carroll gone since five! What can it mean? I might think she had remained with Miss Kingman, but they would have sent me a message surely, knowing how great my anxiety would be. Hark!"

She listened intently, but the light footfall that had attracted her attention passed the door and turned down the hall.

She sighed wearily, and sinking down in a chair, allowed a tear to trickle slowly down her pallid cheek.

She seemed to lose herself in a bitter reverie for some time, during which the storm increased in violence. The flakes of snow and ice were hurled against the window-panes with the fury of a hurricane, and a gust of peculiar violence seemed to shake the tenement to its very foundation.

Mrs. Millbourne started up, clasping her hands in an agony of terror.

"Ten o'clock!" she cried, "and Carroll still not here —still no message from her! I can bear it no longer. What shall I do? I will go to Miss Kingman. If she is not there—"

The poor woman seemed incapable of completing the thought. Her pale lips were set in a rigid line, her haggard eyes contained a desperation that was utterly foreign to their usual placidity.

For a moment she paused to listen to the wild raging of the storm, then seeming to realize without the power of deduction that either bonnet or umbrella would be worse than useless, she wound a shawl about her head and shoulders and hurried down the long flights of stairs to the street.

A great gust of wind and sleet tore at her face like the claws of some fierce animal; but if she felt it she paid no heed.

The streets were deserted save for an occasional truck which staggered through the storm; yet that hideous presentiment of impending evil to her darling lent strength to the weary, flagging steps of the wretched woman.

She turned into a cross-street, the wind and sleet seeming to gain new ascendency. More than once she fell prostrate upon her face; but with difficulty she scrambled to her feet again and tottered on. The snow, freezing as it fell, and swept by the wind, still cut her cruelly. Occasionally she was forced to clutch at an iron railing to prevent herself from falling, her fingers torn and bleeding as they left their cold support.

Not once, under all the difficulties by which she was surrounded, was she tempted to turn back. Her heart seemed so cold and sick under the awful fear that oppressed her that she thought of nothing but to reach the home of her

one friend. She dared not analyze her own fears, but with bent head and tottering steps she staggered on.

She reached Broadway at last, faint, almost exhausted, and supported herself by one of the street lamps until a car drawn by fagged and jaded horses came up. She hailed it and got in.

There were few passengers, but those that were within she scarcely saw. Her ghastly face may have attracted them, but she was only one more of those poor unfortunates whom we pass daily—almost hourly—in our wanderings, so common that we even forget to pity.

Her wild eyes were fixed ever upon the street, a shiver passing over her occasionally as a renewed burst of wind spoke of the increase of the storm. Then at last she signaled to the conductor and left the car.

The wind carried her almost off her feet; but she drew her shawl more closely and went onward.

Only a little way now. The lights from the houses of fashion flickered into the streets, an occasional note of music was heard above the voice of the storm; but Millicent Millbourne was deaf to sound. Once or twice she paused and peered through the shadowy light at the numbers upon the houses, then going onward as rapidly as the storm and her own weariness would permit, she counted the houses.

"It is here!" she moaned at last. "God grant that I may find her safe!"

She paused for a moment as if her frail strength had deserted her, then by a supreme effort, beaten back as she was at every step by the fierceness of the storm, she mounted the stoop and pulled violently at the bell.

Protected somewhat from the storm, she leaned against the inner door, fighting back the faintness that she felt was overcoming her. Then she became conscious that a stream of light from the hall had fallen over her. By a supreme effort she drew herself up and turned to the serv-

ant; but everything grew dark before her. She staggered, and, throwing out her hand, caught the man's arm.

"Miss Kingman!" she gasped. "Quick! I must see her!"

Acquainted as he was with the numerous charities of his mistress, the man did not hesitate, but drew the dripping creature inside the elegant hall.

"Wait here," he said to her, "and I will speak to Miss Kingman."

But Millicent Millbourne had already stood all that her frail constitution could endure. Blindly she groped her way after him, and as he lifted the portière of the drawing-room she pushed by him.

As one recognizes a shadow, she saw Geraldine Kingman rise and come toward her.

"Where is she?" gasped the miserable mother, already conscious of how little hope she had had from the beginning. "Is Carroll here?"

"Carroll?"

"Yes. For God's sake, speak quick!"

"She is not here—has not been here. Oh, Mrs. Millbourne, what has happened?"

But there was no answer. The white-faced figure swayed for a moment, then fell headlong into the arms of the young man who was Geraldine Kingman's guest.

He was scarcely less pale than she. With set lips and a wild burning in the eyes which spoke more plainly than words of his great anxiety, he lifted the frail form in his arms, all wet and dripping as she was, and carried her to a sofa in the library. He lowered her head, and while Geraldine Kingman watched in silent surprise, he restored his patient to consciousness.

When the great blue eyes opened once again, Miss Kingman caught his arm.

"Thomas will carry her to my boudoir, Ballard," she exclaimed, "and my maid will—"

But Ballard Hilliard shook his head.

"Wait!" he said, in a tone she had never heard him use before. "We must know first what has brought her here at this hour and upon a night like this."

Already Millicent Millbourne had struggled to a sitting posture, and was gazing from one to the other in wildest dismay. Very gently Ballard Hilliard took her hands in his, and controlling his own emotion as best he could, said almost tenderly:

"Try to calm yourself, madame, and tell us what has happened. Remember that you are with friends who will go to any length to assist you. It is of Miss Carroll Millbourne that you were speaking, is it not?"

"Yes, yes," she answered, hoarsely, "my daughter. She left me at five o'clock to return a piece of work. She said that she would call here before her return. At ten she had not come."

Ballard Hilliard's face grew still more grave.

"Perhaps—" he began, but she interrupted him.

"It may seem foolish to be so frightened," she cried, miserably, "but her manner at leaving me was so strange, so very strange. Oh, my God! my God! Why did I not think then and keep her with me?"

"Calm yourself, dear madame," exclaimed Hilliard, with great difficulty maintaining his own self-control. "Remember your daughter's fate may depend upon it. Tell me as nearly as you can all that occurred. Keep back nothing, for upon a small detail everything may depend."

And then followed a minute account of that afternoon. A spasm of pain had settled upon Ballard Hilliard's features. He appeared gray and old, but not a word escaped his lips as that wretched mother repeated the last sentence that she had heard fall from her daughter's lips—a sentence that was engraved upon her heart forever.

"Kiss me, dearest, and say 'God bless you,' as you did in those old days that are dead beyond resurrection."

And then Mrs. Millbourne described that sob that had filled even the air with agony.

"What did you say was the number of the house where she went to return the sewing?" asked Hilliard, so hoarsely that neither of them would have recognized his voice.

It was given again. "Remain here until my return," he cried, unable to repress some slight expression of his absorbing anguish. "When I return I will bring news of her. You can do nothing. Leave everything to me, and I will find her as surely as Heaven is above us."

He strode from the room without a glance in the direction of his fiancée, forgetful even of her existence, unconscious that she stood beside him as he paused upon the stoop to button his great-coat about him before plunging into the storm.

CHAPTER VIII.

With hat drawn down closely over his eyes and coat buttoned about his throat, Ballard Hilliard faced the fiercest storm that New York had known in years.

Yet he scarcely seemed to feel it. The gale that would have made progress almost impossible for another seemed to comfort his raging spirit. The cutting of the wind across his face, strange as it may seem, was almost refreshing. He was well-nigh crazed under his awful anxiety for the girl whom he loved better than he did his life, and but for his fear for her safety, the storm would have been a positive relief to his suffering.

He strode on with bent head, unconscious of the tremendous effort he was making to keep his feet, blinded by the sleet and snow that blew in gusts into his eyes, yet walking with comparative rapidity, led by intuition rather than any connected reason. He seemed stunned by the fear that paralyzed his heart.

There was not a cab to be seen, and no line of cars that led to the address that Mrs. Millbourne had given; but the distance was not great, and it was with something like a revival of hope that he paused before the house that she had indicated, to make sure of the number, then staggered up the stoop and rang the bell.

It was then for the first time that he realized that he was almost frozen. His stiff fingers nearly refused when called upon to fasten themselves about the bell-knob, his mustache was frozen in a straight icicle across his mouth, and when the flood of light from the hall fell upon him as the door was opened by the servant, he could scarcely control his tongue sufficiently to ask his question: "Is Mrs. Lahmen at home?"

The servant stared in some surprise that any one should call at that hour and in a storm so violent; but seeing that it was a gentleman who had addressed her, she answered:

"Yes, sir, I think so. Will you walk in?"

Grateful for the warmth that was offered, and scarcely able to control his anxiety, he stepped inside, allowed the girl to close the door, then stationed himself near the radiator in the hall.

"I will wait here," he said to the maid. "I am too wet to go into the drawing-room. Say to Mrs. Lahmen that I will not detain her a moment."

The girl departed upon her errand, and shortly after a lady descended the stairs. Hilliard had somewhat recovered from the terrible chill, and with hat in hand went forward to meet her.

"I must apologize for intruding upon you at this hour, Mrs. Lahmen," he said, in his accustomed high-bred way that no one ever by any chance mistook; "but I am very anxious about a young lady who is thought to have come to your house upon an errand this afternoon, and who has not as yet returned home. I refer to Miss Carroll Millbourne. Is she here?"

"Carroll Millbourne? Oh, no! She was here a little after five o'clock, but left before the breaking of the storm. She certainly had ample time to have reached home long before it began to snow."

A faintness seized upon Ballard Hilliard. He staggered against the wall, his face ghastly in its set pallor. For a moment it seemed that he had utterly lost control of himself. Mrs. Lahmen turned hurriedly to her servant.

"Tell Thomas to bring some brandy at once, and get a chair for this gentleman," she exclaimed.

Hilliard received the chair gratefully, in a measure recovering himself, and smiled at Mrs. Lahmen in a way that touched her heart.

"I am sorry to trouble you," he said, as quietly as he could force his shaking voice to speak; "but my fear for Miss Millbourne almost overcame me for the moment. I have quite recovered from the weakness now. I can't describe the storm to you. It is frightful, and she has not reached home. Will you tell me what you can of her call here?"

"There seems to be so little to tell," answered the lady, hesitatingly; "yet now that you recall it all to me, I remember that there was something most peculiar in Miss Millbourne's manner. She refused to receive the money that was due her mother for the work that she had done, but begged me to send it to her to-morrow morning. I recall that there was a most peculiar expression upon her face when she made the request, but naturally, not being particularly well acquainted with her, I asked no questions. And now that you have brought it to my memory with your interrogation, there was one other point that attracted my attention. The nurse was coming in with baby at the time that Miss Millbourne was leaving. She took the child from nurse's arms, kissed her passionately, laid her back, and hurried from the room."

But the latter remembrance seemed not to affect Hil-

liard as the former had done. He knew perfectly well that the Millbournes were not in such affluent circumstances that they could refuse to receive money that was rightly their due, and the fact struck him with peculiar significance.

He took the glass of brandy that the servant had brought, and swallowed it as if the fiery liquid had been water; then he arose. He did not care to communicate his fears to this woman; but in a voice that was unrecognizably hoarse, he asked:

"Is that all?"

"I think so."

"She said nothing about where she was going from here?"

"Nothing."

"I thank you very much for your kindness, and wish you good-evening."

"You are quite welcome to the little I have been able to tell you; but I should like for you to let me know when Miss Millbourne is safe. There is something in the extraordinary beauty of the child that seems to attract every one to her, and I shall feel anxious until I know that she is with her friends again."

Some irrepressible impulse caused Ballard Hilliard to put out his hand and grasp that of the woman beside him. He felt her sympathy for the girl he loved in the tone of her kind voice, and it touched him deeply.

"Thank you," he said, simply. "I shall do so." And then Mrs. Lahmen held the door open for him until he had once more faced the storm, but now without that hope that had buoyed him up during the walk there.

His heart was torn with all kinds of fears. What had happened to Carroll? Why had she left her home in that strange way? What had caused the significant conversation with her mother?

And then the horrible fear came over him that she had

killed herself. He turned giddy and held to the railing for support; but he put the thought from him with a savage force that seemed to impart strength. He recovered himself and went doggedly on.

The storm was still in the fiercest of its struggle, but he pressed onward with a resolution that would have carried him through a greater difficulty.

He went to the nearest police station and had the alarm sent out; then he realized, with a sinking of the heart, that he had done all he could do.

Yet how was he to face that wretched mother again, believing as he did that he was the cause of her daughter's strange disappearance, and with nothing to tell her but that her worst fears were realized—that there was nothing to tell, that Carroll's fate was as much in darkness as ever?

He groaned audibly. His own heart seemed breaking under the greatness of his grief, yet his first thought was of that miserable mother whom he had worse than robbed of more than her life. How he cursed himself and his own mad folly that had plunged them all in that bitter misery! Yet it was too late to recall it. The act was in that dead past that even the power of a God can not erase.

If he could have died out there in the storm rather than go back and face those two women, both of whom he had so cruelly wronged, it would have been a happier fate; but there was little cowardice in the nature of Ballard Hilliard. He returned to them, and he went as quickly as the storm would allow.

But it was a terrible struggle. Chilled as he already was to the very marrow of his bones, weary and heart-sore, faint from the sickening fear upon him, thinking at every step how impossible it was for a frail thing like Carroll to live through such a storm, the walk was a terrible one.

Having arrived at the house, he pulled the bell feebly, but not so feebly but that it was heard by the two anxious women within.

Miss Kingman herself it was who answered the summons. She seized him by the arm and almost dragged him into the house. Neither seemed capable of putting the question that was spoken by both pairs of anxious, suffering eyes; but Hilliard did not even see his fiancée. He was looking at the mother of the girl whom he had so madly loved, thinking of the terrible blow that he must inflict. He pushed Geraldine Kingman from him without a glance in her direction, and going to Mrs. Millbourne, he took both her hands in his.

"You must not despair," he said, hoarsely, trying to infuse his voice with a courage he was far from feeling, and failing piteously. "I have not found her, but I swear to you that, if your child is still upon this earth, she shall be restored to you! Try to trust me, if you can, as you would trust your own son."

But the last words were uttered to deaf ears, for Mrs. Millbourne was lying silently upon the floor, with upturned, unconscious face.

There was an expression of bewilderment and horror upon Miss Kingman's face that was not translatable; but Hilliard was blind to all that. She watched him, half stunned, as for the second time he lifted the still body in his stiff, numb arms.

CHAPTER IX.

When Carroll left the residence of Mrs. Lahmen she paused at the foot of the stoop, half bewildered under the uncertainty and terror that were upon her.

The act of leaving home was no suddenly conceived notion with her. She had known for some time that it must be done sooner or later to save herself from the shame that she had brought upon herself and her mother; but, like all women, she had hoped against hope for that interposition of Providence that never comes. But it was

almost with the suddenness of a blow that she realized that the time had come when her departure could be in safety postponed no longer.

Yet as much as she had thought of the subject in the silence and darkness of her own chamber, she had arrived at no conclusion as to what she should do.

She must go away. That seemed to be the only definite idea that she possessed, and it had so completely prostrated her mentally that she had been able to think out no plan by which she could aid herself.

"What am I to do?" she asked of herself, helplessly, as she stood there under the threatening sky. "Shall I take her advice and drown my misery and my shame together? God help me, I can not—I can not! I have not the right. If it were but my worthless life alone—but, no; it can not be! I must live for the sake of— Thou, God, who had pity upon the Magdalene, have mercy upon me!"

She turned away aimlessly and walked onward with bent head, unconscious of the direction she was taking, too much stunned by the awfulness of her position to be able to think or plan even remotely for her future.

The storm had not broken, but the wind was blowing heavily—a fierce, biting gale that cut her like a knife—but she did not pause to consider it. She was leaving forever everything that life had ever held dear to her—her mother, her friend, her lover! There was nothing left—nothing! Death would have been so easy to her, and yet she dared not consider that.

She was in the teeth of a hideous agony, driven by the most cruel fate that ever scourged an innocent and helpless girl.

And, after all, the fault was not hers, but an error of that great mastering passion, Love, that is God-given.

She was too wearily miserable to consider the horrible uncertainty, the frightful dangers of the unknown life into which she was going; but with semi-unconsciousness

she went onward. She was recalled to a knowledge of her surroundings by the bustle and confusion around her —the crossing of street-cars, the hurrying of men and women—and looking about her almost for the first time, she realized that she was in front of the Grand Central Depot.

She paused and tried to collect her wits. She had saved a little money from the pittance she had been enabled to earn, knowing that this day was at hand; and almost without taking time for a second of reflection, she followed the people who were entering the station.

There was a girl just in front of her—a girl about her own age and size—a girl that was not unlike her as to her back and hair—and as she followed, a desire to see the face of this traveler, who was also alone, possessed her. She quickened her steps. The face was not pretty, but there was an expression of such sorrow in it that Carroll felt herself instinctively drawn to the stranger. She walked directly behind her to the window of the ticket-office.

In a soft voice that spoke of considerable refinement, the stranger asked for a ticket for Albany; and following her example, Carroll opened her well-worn purse and repeated the request. The girl turned and glanced at her fellow-traveler. The same magnetism that had attracted Carroll seemed to reach her, for as she met the girl's eye a smile passed over her plain, pale face.

Carroll smiled in return. Is it singular that suffering recognizes its companion? There are strange fatalities in this curious old world of ours.

Margaret Denning stopped when she had passed the ticket-office, and waited until Carroll had received her change.

"Are you going to Albany?" she asked, quietly.

"Yes."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Shall we not go together, then? Traveling alone is not nearly so pleasant as when one has an agreeable companion."

"Perhaps I shall not prove very agreeable, in so far as being entertaining goes, but I shall be very glad of your society," answered Carroll, thankful that something was to interrupt the misery of her own reflections.

The two walked on together and took their seats in the train.

"Do you live in Albany?" asked Miss Denning, with a smile that was most winning.

"No; I have never been there in my life. Do you know the city?"

"Not at all. The fact is that I am sadly afraid I am going upon a fool's errand. My mother died three years ago, leaving me all alone in the world. She had one sister, whose address she did not know; but they had loved each other very dearly in their girlhood, and my mother made me promise that if ever I heard of her I would go to see her, and, if welcome, remain under her care. I heard last week that she was living in Albany, though I am as yet uncertain of the address. The consequence is that I have not written, but am going there hoping that I may find her. It is a terrible struggle for a girl to live in this world alone."

Carroll shivered.

"It must be," she said, drearily.

"Are you going to friends?" asked the girl, kindly.

"No; I have none. I am going to make my own way in the world."

Miss Denning looked at her sharply; but seeing the whitened pain and misery in the young face, she swallowed the words that were upon her lips, and said instead:

"You are very pretty—cruelly pretty. It will be worse for you than it has been for me. God pity you!"

There was a long silence between them, during which each seemed busy with her own most painful reflections. The train was running swiftly. The darkness had come suddenly, and the wind was whistling with peculiar fierceness. Several times the brakeman came into the car and filled the already crimson stove with coals, for the night was one of intense coldness. The storm was coming, and many persons, with their hands shading their eyes, peered into the darkness without through the windows, shivering as they realized the strength of the hurricane.

Then great flakes of snow pattered against the glass—snow that froze tightly as it fell.

"It is a wild night without," a hoarse voice at the end of the car said aloud. "I don't remember to have seen a storm like this in twenty years."

There was silence again, and the people shuddered.

Still the train moved rapidly, the shrill scream of the locomotive, heard occasionally above the voice of the wind, sounding like some human thing gasping for help. The passengers huddled together, as if some premonition of impending danger hung over them and there was hope of courage in their proximity to one another.

"It is frightful!" whispered Carroll to her new friend, drawing a trifle closer to her. "Are not you afraid?"

Miss Denning laughed softly.

"No!" she answered. "There is something grand to me in a superb storm like this. I am a fatalist, or perhaps I should say, a believer in predestination. God knows best, and I am willing to leave my life in His hands. No; I am not afraid."

The quietness of the tone seemed to calm Carroll, for she sat for some moments forgetful of her own suffering in listening to the wildness of the wind as it swept madly about the car.

"It is cold, don't you think?" asked Miss Denning, after another long pause.

"Rather."

"Let us go closer to the stove."

"But in the event of an accident—"

"Nonsense! Why should there be one to-night more than any other night?"

"I don't know, but—"

"You are nervous. Don't be foolish."

"I am afraid I can't help it."

"Do you think if God intended that you should die He would save you because you happen to be sitting in this seat instead of over there? Come!"

She arose, and smiling down upon Carroll with that same fascinating smile that she had seen upon the plain features once before, held out her hand. Carroll arose at once.

There was an anxious expression upon her face; a fear that had driven out misery shone upon her countenance.

The train had slowed up for some reason, and almost every face in the car was shaded as the passengers peered from the windows.

"Looks like a bridge," said some one as Carroll was passing.

Miss Denning had already reached her seat and had taken the one next the window, making room for Carroll beside her. There was a sudden lurch of the car that threw Carroll backward before she had reached it. She caught upon one of the seats and saved herself from falling; but before she could recover her balance there was a fierce howl of the wind more terrible than all the rest. For a moment the moving train seemed to quiver, then—God knows what happened.

There was a wild shriek from a thousand throats—and silence!

CHAPTER X.

COMPUTED in minutes, perhaps that hideous silence continued scarcely two, but to those miserable beings, paralyzed with fright, lying there stricken, wounded, dying in the *débris*, it seemed ages; but it is curious how quickly the human mind will recover from a shock, no matter how stunning in its effect.

It was from a trestle-work that crossed a deep ravine that the train had been blown, and there, at the bottom, the cars were smashed in pieces, some lying across each other, others stretched out stark and stiff like huge dead animals, but all telling their own story of death and destruction.

As soon as they had realized what had happened, those who had escaped unhurt began to pull themselves from the broken timbers that had fallen upon and pinioned them. Then began the groans and curses from the men, shrieks from the women, and piteous cries from children, that make a scene like that give a man such as Dante a conception of Inferno.

But for all their oaths and blasphemy, the men worked like Trojans. Twenty had, perhaps, made their escape from the ruins and were engaged in the charitable work of assisting others, when suddenly there was a cry of horror from every lip, and for a single second the hands that answered the will of sympathetic hearts were stopped under the wild fear that took possession of them.

"Fire! The cars are on fire!"

It was but too true. The overturned stoves had begun to do their deadly work, and the flames, fanned to fury by the terrible gale, leaped higher and higher, licking about in every direction in search of fresh fuel for its hideous work.

The red glare and crackling of the flames, the fierce roar of the wind, the groans and cries of the doomed wretches, completed a scene that could only be surpassed in horror by the very center of Hades.

But the terrors of the situation only seemed to lend new strength to that noble little band of rescuers, and they worked with the energy born of despair. A few more workers were added to their number, men who had been released from some object which had held them prisoners, and, forgetful of their own cuts and bruises, they tugged at heavy objects that confined their fellow-sufferers, their faces blackened with smoke, their willing hands blistered with the flames; but still they paused not.

How readily we can understand, under circumstances like these, that noble, generous man was created in the likeness of God!

Person after person was taken from the burning wreck and laid upon the ground under the pouring sleet and snow. There was no time to ascertain whether they were living or dead, for there were others to be saved. Overcoats were thrown over the women until the supply was exhausted, and the others were forced to take their chances with the unconscious men.

It was a night to be remembered through all ages.

It is singular with what wonderful rapidity bad news flies, sometimes apparently without any means of transportation whatever. No one knew how they heard the news, but very soon lanterns were seen to flicker through the pitchy darkness. There were hasty orders given by the recruits, and the work went on with renewed energy.

But there was no time to be lost. The flames were gaining! But a few more bodies, dead or alive, could be rescued, and then the effort must be abandoned.

A noble man, with eyebrows and lashes burned from his face, was making a heroic endeavor to extricate a body from under one of the burning seats that held it firmly.

His hands were blistered, but he would not yield to pain, and with an effort born of fury he tore the broken seat aside and lifted the small form in his arms.

"Poor child!" he muttered. "I did my best, but it is too late. I wonder what mother will weep for her!"

He laid her tenderly upon the ground and turned to survey the scene.

There was nothing more that could be done. Human aid was powerless.

The dark, motionless figures of the men stood there for a moment surveying the ruins under the still glaring light of the fire, then wearily turned to their self-imposed charges.

"What are we to do with these people?" some one asked, in stentorian tones, the uncanny sound of the voice making every one shiver. "Is there any one here who knows the country?"

"My house is just up the hill," answered a man whose face no one could see. "It is large, and at the service of the people, if we can manage to get them there."

But there was no question of "if" with those great-hearted men. They set to work with a will to improvise stretchers, and some with them, others carrying their heavy burdens in their arms, they followed the faint flicker of a lantern, and staggered up the hill to the handsome house at the top.

The doors were thrown open, and with surprising rapidity the house was converted into a temporary hospital as well as morgue.

The beds were utilized for those who were most hurt, until the supply was exhausted, the dead were placed upon chairs or upon the floor, and the wreck in the ravine left to itself until the light of morning would allow the men to finish their work for the dead.

The women of the household, as well as those who had escaped comparatively unhurt from the accident, worked

with a will under the direction of three physicians who were upon the train, and what service human aid could give was rendered to those suffering beings.

One of the ladies of the house bent with a physician over a tiny, childish body that lay upon a couch.

"Do you think she is dead, doctor?" she asked, glancing into his anxious, puzzled face.

"No," he answered; "she is not dead, but it is impossible to tell just yet how badly hurt she is."

"I am glad she is not dead, at all events. She is so beautiful! It would be a terrible blow to her mother."

"And to her husband, perhaps."

"Her husband?"

"Yes; she is married, I think. Will you examine her while I am waiting upon the others, and see if there is anything by which she can be identified?"

As Mrs. Jeffers bent over the white face upon the sofa pillow, she fancied she saw a crimson glow in the cheeks. A moment later she was convinced that she was not mistaken, for the great eyes were opened and fixed upon her.

There was a minute of bewilderment, then the little figure sat up.

"I remember now," she said, piteously, passing her hand across her eyes. "It was an accident to the train, was it not?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Jeffers, tenderly. "Are you much hurt? What seems to be the matter with you?"

"Nothing. I am dazed, that is all. Was any one hurt?"

"It was frightful! But you must not ask me any questions now. Lie down. You are very weak and white, and may not be so well as you think. To-morrow you shall know everything that I can tell you."

"But there is no reason why I should not know now. I am not hurt."

"There are numbers killed outright. You are very

fortunate to have escaped with your life. But now, will you not tell me your name and where we can telegraph to your friends? You know the news of the disaster will be in the papers to-morrow, and your family will be anxious concerning you unless they know that you are quite safe."

A crimson glow again covered the girl's face.

"There is no one to whom you could telegraph," she answered, huskily.

"Not your husband?"

There was a momentary hesitation upon the part of the girl, then with downcast eyes she answered, faintly:

"He is dead."

"Poor child—poor little helpless thing! You are very young for that."

The sad eyes that were lifted to the woman's face filled with tears. There was an instant of hesitation, then Mrs. Jeffers leaned over and kissed the sweet, childish lips.

The girl arose immediately.

"You see I am quite recovered," she said, hurriedly. "If there are others hurt, let me help you with them."

And knowing that there were so few to do what was required to be done, Mrs. Jeffers consented.

Together the two left the room and entered the great drawing-room, which for the time had been converted into a dead-house.

Near the door, upon two chairs, lay a girl, part of her hair streaming across her face, which was burned until absolutely unrecognizable. Her clothes had been burned from the poor blistered body, which was protected by a sheet thrown across it.

As Mrs. Jeffers with her companion entered the room, a few persons were standing beside the corpse, one man with a pencil and paper in his hand, evidently the reporter for a paper.

Some one said in an under-tone, as the two ladies entered:

"That young lady can identify her. They were traveling together."

The young man turned round.

For a moment the room swam before the eyes of the girl. She knew that a question was being put to her, but a giddiness that was almost unconsciousness overcame her, and she staggered against the door. She had realized in an instant what had happened, and as the question was asked, her resolution was taken.

"Can you tell us who this lady is?"

"Yes," she answered, faintly. "Her name is Carroll Millbourne. She is from New York."

CHAPTER XI.

THE audacity of her own falsehood left Carroll Millbourne weak and trembling, leaning against the wall for the support that her limbs refused her.

She had given that dead girl her name—that poor creature of whose identity she was entirely unaware, knowing that her friends would accept the statement as correct, knowing that there was scarcely a chance that she should be detected in the fraud, for the face was burned beyond recognition, while not an atom of her original clothing remained upon the poor charred body. There was the hair left, to be sure, and the stature remained the same; but she had before remarked how nearly like her own they were. She knew, therefore, that in so far as her mother and those others whom she had left behind were concerned, she would be as dead when that lifeless body was sent them as if it were in reality Carroll Millbourne who would lie in the grave that they would prepare.

She was not slow to recognize the deliverance that God had sent, and while she deplored the necessity of falsehood, she thanked Him for sending her a way to save herself a greater sin.

"Can you give me her address?" asked the reporter, kindly.

It was given in faint, trembling tones; then some one noticed how white she had grown under the emotion that had overtaken her. An arm was thrown about her and she was led from the room.

It was not until she was placed upon the same sofa in the library upon which she had returned to consciousness, that Carroll raised her eyes to the face of her companion; but naturally given to thinking quickly, she had already reviewed the situation with singular clearness.

The woman beside her was beyond her prime, but the silver hair framed a countenance of peculiar beauty, if of peculiar firmness. There was not a weak line in the aristocratic old face, unless tenderness and gentleness could be classed as weakness. There was an expression of pride in the well-cut lips that impressed Carroll even in her nervous condition, but instinctively she felt that she could trust the lady who held her hands so kindly.

"The little girl in the other room is your sister, is she not?" the woman asked.

"No, madame," answered Carroll, endeavoring to speak distinctly, though her voice trembled piteously. "We were no relation whatever."

"You were close friends, then?"

"Not even that. I never saw her until yesterday. We were traveling together, because we were going to the same place to try to make our way in the world. It was a venture with both of us, therefore we were somewhat confidential."

"You are going to fill some position, then?"

"I am going to try. I am afraid I am very ignorant for anything of that sort; but it seems to me that there should always be something for willing hands to do."

"There is no definite position, then?"

"Oh, no! I am going to try to get work, that is all."

"But you are very young to be alone in the world and dependent upon yourself."

A wan smile made Carroll's face extremely beautiful.

"I am not so young as I look. My youthful appearance has always been against me."

"Not so much as your beauty will be in the life to which you are going. What can you do?"

"Very little, I am afraid."

"You must pardon me for questioning you so closely, but there may be something that I can do to assist you, and in that event I should be very glad. I was on the same train with you last night, though I don't believe we were in the same car, and it seems to me that it is a duty I owe to God for having allowed me to escape that I should do something for one of His creatures in return."

"God has been doubly good to me in that He spared my life and sent me you. I can not sufficiently thank you, madame."

"Don't try yet, as I have done nothing for which to be thanked; but let us go over a list of your accomplishments—sort of schedule, so to speak," said the lady, with a peculiarly winning smile. "You say you must make your own living. Now, what can you do?"

A puzzled expression crossed Carroll's face.

"I am very ignorant," she said, helplessly. "Let me see—I can sew fairly well, and—and—"

She paused and glanced into the woman's face appealingly.

"Can you read aloud well?"

"Tolerably well."

"Can you sing?"

"I can sing, but can not play. We have always been poor, and my voice is not cultivated, save in so far as my father was able to teach me, and that was very little."

"Do you speak any of the languages?"

"French a little. My mother spoke it well, but she

was ill so much that she had small opportunity of teaching me. I think I read it better than I speak it."

"That is good. What kind of a position did you expect to fill when you reached your destination—that is, for what should you have applied?"

A shade of bewilderment crossed Carroll's brow. In truth, she had not thought at all; but she dared not tell this practical woman that. With some embarrassment she answered:

"I suppose there would have been nothing for it but to have gone to an employment agency and have taken anything that was given me."

The lady shook her head dubiously.

"A most uncertain dependence," she said, quietly. "How should you like to go home with me? It will be very easy to try you and see in what way you can be useful; then, if the plan fails, neither you nor I will be worse off than before."

Carroll's eyes filled with tears.

"I don't know how I have deserved this kindness," she said, brokenly.

"Then you accept?"

"Most gladly."

"At least, you will be safe with me for the time, and if there is nothing else that I can do, I can advise you as to the future."

"I will try very hard to please you in any position in which you may place me."

No one could look into the honest little face and doubt that.

"I am sure of that. But we have made all these arrangements without even knowing each other's names. I am Mrs. Shannon."

It hurt Carroll grievously to be compelled to begin her new life with this kind woman with a lie; but in order to

save her mother the shame that had already ruined her own life, she knew that it must be done.

Her eyes fell; but she raised them bravely, and answered, without a tremor in her voice:

"My name is Coralie—Coralie Mills. I am a widow."

"Coralie! That is very pretty and suited to you. There is just another thing that we have not mentioned; were you going to the destination which you had chosen for any special reason?"

"No."

"Then you will not mind changing it?"

"Not in the least."

"That is well. We live in Philadelphia, my son and I, and have decided since the wreck, and in consideration of the fact that all our baggage was burned in the baggage-car, that we will return there at once. You will not object, then, to accompanying us?"

"I shall be only too glad.'

"Then that is settled."

Mrs. Shannon arose with a smile. She had taken a great fancy to the girl whose future she had taken into her own hands, and it was with something like a gratification of pride that she looked upon her beauty. She was standing with Carroll's hand still clasped in hers, when the door opened and a young man entered.

He was handsome, after the blonde fashion of the Norseman, and filled the idea perfectly in so far as his form and features were concerned. Women raved over Russell Shannon, perhaps one reason being his proverbial indifference to them all. It was that very fact which prevented any misgivings in the mind of his mother when she proposed taking the beautiful but unknown girl into her household as a member of her family.

There was no danger to Russell, and the mother turned to him without a thought of fear in her proud old head.

"The train leaves for New York at four, mother," he

said to her, in a slow, musical voice. "Shall you be ready?"

"Yes," she answered, smiling at him fondly. "We shall not go alone, however. The wreck has given us an addition to our lonely household, and I am sure you will feel as glad to have a young person in it as I shall. Let me introduce you. Mrs. Mills, my son, Mr. Shannon."

Russell Shannon bowed coldly; then, as his eyes rested on the beautiful face, the expression changed to one of intense interest, that might have aroused some alarm in his keen-sighted mother's eyes had she been looking, but she was gazing at Carroll, and the unmoved countenance pleased her.

Her only fear had been for Carroll, not her son; but, with a sigh of relief, that thought was removed.

How strangely the future convinced her of her own short-sightedness God alone foresaw then.

CHAPTER XII.

"Bad news flies swiftly," and the old trite saying was never more fully verified than upon the occasion when New York awoke the following morning with the news of the great Hudson River disaster.

It was cried upon the streets by diligent newsboys in connection with the printed story of the terrible storm; but none of the persons in whom we are most interested paid any heed. What had they to do with the Hudson River disaster? Their own grief was surely great enough without their weeping for others at that time.

Mrs. Millbourne remained during the night with Miss Kingman, while Hilliard made two pilgrimages to the tenement to make sure that Carroll had not returned there, but each time his fears became even greater than before. There was nothing like sleep possible for any one

of them while Carroll's fate remained a mystery, and it is doubtful if they even thought of it.

They made some pretense of eating breakfast; then, as he arose from the table, Hilliard announced his intention of going at once to the police station to see if there had been any discoveries made there. Mrs. Millbourne returned to her own home, accompanied by Miss Kingman, as she knew that to that place Carroll would come, if at all, and her wild grief and intense nervousness made it impossible for her to remain longer away.

Hilliard could scarcely have described his own emotions as he entered that little office, fearful of the worst, yet hoping against hope for the best; but his heart seemed choking him as he stood before the sergeant's desk, utterly incapable of putting his question.

But the man, though he was not the same one who had been upon duty during the night, seemed to understand.

"Are you Mr. Hilliard?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You have seen the man whom we sent over to you?"

"No."

The word was almost inaudible, so great was the anxiety underlying it.

The sergeant paused; he was so little given to sympathy in that life where the people he usually met were such hardened wretches; but this man was different, and he was suffering.

"You have—heard?" stammered Hilliard, unable to endure the silence.

"Yes. There is always a doubt of its being true, you know, and you must not abandon hope until there is none. Have you read your paper this morning?"

"No."

"There has been a terrible accident on the Hudson River Railroad."

"An accident?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

Hilliard's face was ghastly. He seemed to understand but too well what was meant, but he would not allow himself to believe. He listened with a strained, breathless horror that was piteous.

"The cars were blown from a trestle-work and then took fire. There are a great number of killed and wounded; more killed than they know of at present, as all the bodies have not yet been extricated."

"Yes," very quietly.

"Will you look at this?"

The sergeant reached under his desk and drew forth a morning paper. He pointed to that fatal column "Killed," and gradually ran his finger down the column until it rested upon the lines:

"Miss Carroll Millbourne; pinioned by a broken seat and almost cremated. Clothes entirely destroyed."

Hilliard saw nothing further. After all, what difference did anything else in the world make to him? Carroll was dead!

He leaned against the sergeant's desk, white and trembling, not a murmur escaping his pallid lips. It seemed to him that the end of the world had come, and nothing mattered after that. Then he became aware, in that dazed way that each of us must have felt under some great crisis in our own lives, that the sergeant was speaking to him.

"You don't know that it is true," he was saying. "The station where the accident happened is not far from here. Why don't you take a friend with you and run up there? You see, they say she was almost cremated; might there not be some mistake?"

Hilliard shook his head. His voice bore no similarity to his own as he replied:

"It is not likely. How could they have got the name?"

The sergeant was silent.

"Good-day, sergeant," he said, heavily. "I shall see you again as soon as it can be done."

"You are going up there?"

"Yes."

The man looked after him as he went down the short flight of steps and into the street, then turned to an officer beside him.

"That fellow got it in the heart that time," he said, with genuine feeling. "I never saw a man feel anything more keenly. God help him! I lost a sweetheart myself once."

Almost without knowing what he did, Hilliard walked swiftly in the direction of the Grand Central Depot. Arrived there, he bought his ticket, then sent a messenger with a simple note to Mrs. Millbourne, telling her that he had found some trace, but that was all. He took his place in the train with bowed head, knowing that he was going to bring home the body of the girl whom he had so loved, knowing that he should find her there and that she was lost to him forever, yet betraying his emotion by never a word.

The most careless observer could have told how he was suffering; his most intimate friend would not have approached him under the sorrow that he must have recognized.

The conductor felt for him when he arrived at the station, knowing by intuition what he was going there for, for there were others upon the train with that same wretched mission before them. There were carriages to meet them, provided by the kindness and thoughtfulness of the Jeffers family, and almost as if they were following the lifeless bodies themselves, the carriages wound slowly up the hill.

Ballard Hilliard did not hesitate. With bared head he walked into the room where a number of improvised biers

were standing spectral with their white draperies in the shadowy light.

He spoke the name of the one he had come to seek in the ear of the attendant, who led him across the room and very gently turned the sheet from an upturned face that was still covered by a handkerchief.

How well he remembered the beautiful reddish gold of that sunny head! He turned from it for a moment, his heart seeming strangled by a groan. It was the first that had escaped him, and was quickly suppressed. He would have removed the handkerchief, but the attendant stopped him.

"Don't do it, sir!" he exclaimed. "It would only make it all the worse for you to bear. She was so badly burned that even the doctors were horrified. Don't remember her like that, sir, if you ever loved her!"

If he ever loved her! How like bitterest mockery the words seemed to him! If only he could have exchanged places with her there, or have lain beside her, life would have seemed less hard; but he must bear it like a man. That was what she would have wished, and he knew it.

He gave the order for her removal home, attended to every minute detail; then, knowing that all was done that could be done, he took the train home—the same train that carried the little form for which he was grieving—to tell the story to that mother whose heart he knew would break.

If he could but have known that in the next car to him the real Carroll Millbourne sat, alive and well, his life—the months of weary misery that followed—would have been very different; but Providence, if always wise, is not always kind, and neither knew of the other's proximity.

Hilliard was striving, even in the first hours of his blinding grief, to fix upon some reason for her leaving home; but he could find none. Since he had discovered that she would have nothing further to do with him, he had let

her alone, though his heart had remained firm in its allegiance. He had even written to her that, if it were her will, the secret should be preserved from Miss Kingman; yet, in spite of all, she had gone.

Then the last words she had ever written him came back to his memory with singular force:

"I could not be happy, even in my grave, knowing that I had robbed her. If you would make me a recompense for the sorrow you have caused me by your silence, go on with your marriage to her. I do not blame you, dear; but you must do that for my sake. It is the last request that I shall ever make of you."

And it was.

What should he do now? All the nobility of the woman who was his promised wife came back to him. He recalled every act of hers of the night before, when his conduct must have appeared most strange to her. She, too, had loved Carroll; and, with bowed head and heart breaking under its terrible burden, he saw that he must do what his love had asked. What mattered his life now?

And his resolution was, that he would tell her part of the truth—not all, in justice to Carroll—and let her decide the rest.

CHAPTER XIII.

Had it not been for the bitter memory of the past and the horrible knowledge of what the future held in store for her, Carroll would have been content in the new home into which it seemed that God had sent her.

Mrs. Shannon and her son lived alone in all the luxury of wealth, with none of its ostentation, and from the beginning, while Carroll had her regular duties to perform —they were not menial—she was made one of them. There was never greater kindness or consideration shown a stranger than she received from both, and her lot, all

things considered, seemed to have fallen into a peculiarly easy groove. She had told Mrs. Shannon little of her former life, adhering as strictly to the truth as her unfortunate situation would allow, and her benefactress had asked no questions beyond what it was most desirable that she should know. Coralie Mills had been married, and her husband had died at a most piteously unfortunate time, and that alone was enough to insure sympathy and kindly treatment of the good woman, even if the girl's beauty had not made its own undeniable impression.

But there was a cloud upon the horizon—a cloud that was to obstruct all the sun in Carroll's new life, though still she was piteously unconscious of it.

She had been in her new quarters scarcely two months when the storm broke cruelly, fiercely, cutting her perhaps with almost as keen sorrow as she had ever known, from her very innocence of wrong. One duty which she was expected to perform each day, and which had become a peculiar pleasure to her, was that in the afternoon she should read to Mrs. Shannon for a couple of hours—sometimes poetry, sometimes romance—a capacity in which Carroll was peculiarly gifted. One afternoon while the reading was in progress Russell Shannon chanced to come into the room, and, fascinated by the sound of the musical voice, he sat down silently behind the reader and listened.

From that day he was always present during those hours of the day. His mother generally fell asleep at the end of the time, a signal to Carroll that her duty was done, and that her time was her own.

She had been reading upon the day in question from a popular romance in which the heroine quotes an extract from a little poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox:

"You have heard me quote from Plato
A thousand times, no doubt;
Well, I have discovered he did not know
What he was talking about."

She had just finished the line when the gentlest and most refined of snores told her that Mrs. Shannon slept. She closed the book, placed it upon the table, arose, and with a faint smile thrown to the son of her benefactress, she silently left the room. Her own chamber offered little attraction to divert her from her reflections, and she sought the little conservatory instead; for is there not something in the companionship of flowers that sweetens solitude? She wandered among them for awhile, then sat down beside a great Japanese lily of singular beauty, seeing nothing. Her arm rested upon the back of the seat, her head was turned in the direction of the window. She was evidently musing too deeply to hear the light footfall behind her, for her lips moved, and the words she had read fell from them:

"'You have heard me quote from Plato
A thousand times, no doubt;
Well, I have discovered he did not know
What he was talking about.'"

Her voice died away slowly, and she was startled to hear some one say:

"Don't you think Mrs. Wilcox struck the key-note of a great truth when she wrote those lines? Do you believe that there can be anything like platonic friendship between man and woman?"

She glanced up, though she had already recognized the voice. It was Russell Shannon who stood there. There was an expression upon his face such as she had not seen there before; but it did not alarm her. She answered very gently:

"Yes, I believe in friendship. Do not you?"

He shook his head.

"Not that kind. A man is too indifferent for a friend, or too passionate. Certainly there is a sort of careless well-wishing between the sexes, an occasional visit, per-

haps, some trifling attention, forgotten as soon as given; but not that kind of friendship—not the kind that sacrifices, that endures through all ages. That is love. Do you think a man always knows the moment that interest alters to love?"

Carroll was looking at him without seeing him. Her memory had reverted to that sweet time when for those few months she had been so blissfully happy. Was there ever a time when she did recognize that great love? Ah, dear God! how her heart yearned over it! Was it to be wondered at then that her face assumed a dreamy tenderness that deceived her listener?

"Does it ever?" she questioned in an under-tone filled with emotion. "It seems to me that love is born upon the instant. It knows no past, recognizes no future, lives alone in the present. It is sufficient unto itself. There is but one holier creation of God, and that is gratitude."

Russell Shannon was stirred to the very depths of his heart. How was he to understand that she was speaking to a memory and not to him? He knew that he loved that girl-wife, who was so recently widowed, and, manlike, her sorrow but endeared her to him. He had misunderstood her words.

"Love knows no past."

That was the expressed thought that was her undoing.

He took the seat beside her and slipped his arm about her waist, his countenance filled with a manly, chivalrous devotion that was an honor to any woman.

"Coralie," he whispered, "I know that I have done little to deserve the love of any woman. I may be speaking to you with brutal suddenness, but if love is born like that, surely I may be forgiven. Darling, have you never suspected—"

But she had shrunk from him in fear and trembling.

"Don't!" she gasped, feebly, putting up her hands as if to ward off a blow—"don't, for the love of Heaven!

You don't know what you are saying! What do you know of me that you should—"

She paused, unable to continue, and he finished the sentence for her.

"That I should ask you to become my wife? I know that I love you. Is it not enough? Ah, don't! Do you think I do not understand? You have suffered bitterly, cruelly, perhaps; but that only endears you to me. See, I ask no questions. I am more than willing to trust you. You shall have your own time. Only tell me that some day you will be my wife, and I shall be content to wait."

For the first time during those awful months of suffering Carroll was weeping. Her whole heart seemed melting into tears. She did not repulse him as he drew her to his breast. It seemed such a comfort to rest upon the bosom of one whom she did not fear. She allowed him to soothe her, listened as he murmured words of hope and consolation; then she lifted her glistening eyes to his.

"I would give all this world," she said, brokenly, "if I were but worthy of your love. I would give my life if I might but answer you as I should like; but that can not be. I can never be your wife—never! There are reasons that reach higher than eternity that will stand between you and me for all ages!"

"Coralie!"

"If you would spare me a grief as great as any that I have ever known, never speak to me again upon this subject. I have been so content here. Do not make it necessary that I should go out into the world alone, for I am afraid. I am so helpless, so cruelly alone, and oh, God! life has been so hard!"

Still she had not drawn herself from his embrace. There was nothing in it beyond the expression of affection of an honest man; there was not a shadow of insult in the encirling arm. It was but a tender expression of love, that was all.

"If it distresses you, dear heart, you may be quite sure that the subject will be buried in my own bosom," he said, softly; "but there will come a time when you will repent. The greatness of my love insures that, and when that time comes there is just one thing that I would have you remember, Coralie; it is 'that a love like mine can know no death.' When you have changed toward me—when my love has ceased to be a burden to you, you will come to me, you will tell me, you will trust me, will you not?"

She arose and stood before him, her eyes still shining under her tears.

"I will trust you all my life as the kindest, most generous, the noblest man I have ever known!" she said, brokenly.

He drew her to him, and her lips touched his forehead with the simplicity of a child; then he let her go.

If that had but been all! But it was not. A pair of stern, cold eyes, glittering under a pride that was their owner's single and besetting sin, had witnessed the latter portion of the scene, had seen the tears, had heard the avowal of love on part of the man, and had heard the answer—"I will trust you all my life as the kindest, most generous, the noblest man I have ever known," and her own construction was put upon it.

As Carroll left the conservatory, a heavy hand was placed upon her arm, and a hoarse voice that she scarcely recognized said in her ear:

"Come with me to the library; I wish to speak with you."

The poor child looked into Mrs. Shannon's set face, and that intuition that does not often err in woman told her that another crisis in her life had come—the most cruel and undeserved, perhaps, of all!

CHAPTER XIV.

ALL through the miserable day that followed the discovery of the daughter's supposed death and the burial of that unknown girl over whom such passionate tears were shed, Ballard Hilliard was more like a son to Millicent Millbourne than anything else.

He was beside her constantly, speaking some word of consolation, or performing some little act of kindness that, without acknowledgment upon her part, was an infinite source of comfort to her. She had not paused to question herself yet as to its cause. Her grief was too new and too bitter for that. She simply yielded to the sweetness of feeling that she was not quite alone in the world—that she was not entirely without friends, and indulged her sorrow.

And Hilliard found the greatest comfort in ministering to her. All this Geraldine Kingman watched in silence. If her great, true heart ached under it, if there was a suspicion aroused in her, if in the silence of her own chamber at night she grieved over a shattered dream, no one knew. She shut it up in her own bosom, conscious that her lamentations could effect nothing.

She was as kind—perhaps kinder—to Hilliard than she had ever been before, and his heart smote him as he saw and thoroughly recognized the greatness of her generosity. How he cursed himself for the past only God and his own conscience could have guessed; but it was beyond recall; and when his grief could be dominated by reason he saw that he must bury it in the grave that they had dug for his dead love.

With that thought uppermost in his mind he went to call upon Miss Kingman one evening. He bent and kissed her as she came into the room—a thing which he had for-

gotten to do of late—but she did not repulse him. On the contrary, she smiled under it, and did not endeavor to disengage her hand from his as he drew her beside him upon the sofa.

"I am glad to see you looking better, Ballard," she said to him, gently. "You are growing more like yourself again."

His face flushed.

"I don't think I can ever be like my old self in one way, Jerry," he said, using the old pet name that he had used to her in childhood. "I should have to lose this new-found appreciation and gratitude to be that, and that would take something that is most sweet out of my life. Do you know what I mean, Jerry? Ah, dear, how little I have known you! How little I have guessed the real worth of your character! How little I have deserved your affection!"

She grew crimson under the pleasure his words gave her. There was nothing that she could answer. To disclaim the truth of his statement was like affectation, and there was nothing else to be said.

"I have a confession to make to you, Jerry," he went on, after a pause—"a confession that should have been made long ago, but you are too brave to understand how an unpleasant duty is put off from one day to another, in the hope that it will come easier at some future time. You could not do that. You would face the situation at once."

She put up her hand with a little gesture of deprecation.

"Oh, hush!" she cried, huskily. "How little you know me, after all! I am not brave, but the greatest coward under heaven. If that had not been true, do you think I should not have relieved you of your embarrassment long ago?"

"You know, then?"

She hesitated before replying, then answered, very softly:

"I have suspected."

He covered his face with his disengaged hand. There were no tears in his eyes when he removed it, but she had felt a quivering sigh shake his entire form.

"Do you think you can ever forgive me, Jerry?" he whispered.

"There is nothing to forgive, Ballard," she answered, striving to steady her voice. "You were not to blame. The heart is the one organ that will not be held in subjection. I can not quite understand the situation, but the only fault I have ever found was that you did not trust me. But that now is forgotten."

"Do you mean that there can no longer remain between us the promise that was given in the old days? Do you mean that you will not be my wife?"

She was silent a moment, then turned to him very gravely.

"Look at me, dear," she said, quietly, "and as you value your life's happiness and mine, conceal nothing of the truth from me. What is your own desire upon the subject?"

"That we should stand by the old pledge, Jerry, if you think it will ever be possible for you to trust me again," he answered, earnestly.

A mist came before her eyes. A great cry of thankfulness rose in her heart, but there was little display of emotion in her manner to him. Tender, gentle, but not demonstrative, she pressed his hand slightly.

"Then your wish is mine, Ballard," she replied.

He took her in his arms and kissed her.

"I have not deserved this," he said, his voice breaking painfully; "but I swear to you, Jerry, that I will do everything that lies in my power to make you happy. I swear that if the devotion of my whole life can be reward sufficient for your generosity, it shall be yours forever!"

"Don't!" she cried, desperately. "You make me feel

such a hypocrite. Do you think that it is alone because of you that I have decided as I have? If it really were consideration of you, I should have said 'no' out of kindness, because I am afraid that I believe you would be happier without a wife; but I have not the courage of my own convictions. I love you! It sounds unwomanly and indelicate to say it under circumstances such as these, but it is my own selfishness that causes me to accept the sacrifice that you are making. Oh, Ballard! can't you see? Can't you understand? If there were another woman living whom you preferred to me, I should release you without a word; but as there is not, I will do all I can to make your life a comfort to you, dear, and some day it may not seem so hard as it does just at present."

There was more passion in her speech than any he had ever heard her make, and the depth of her love astonished him.

"Is it possible, Jerry," he questioned, wonderingly, "that you have loved me like that?"

"Did you ever doubt it?"

"I never suspected. The arrangement was made for us, and you seemed always to me to have yielded—well, because it was the easiest thing to do. I did not think that my affection would have made the difference of a thought in your life."

"Ballard!"

She had faced him passionately, all the glowing depths of her nature aroused and beaming through her burning eyes.

"Have I been so cold?" she asked, earnestly. "Have I been so unresponsive as that? Then I have deserved what I have received. But, oh, dear, you have been mistaken! All my heart and soul have been yours. I have loved you with a devotion that was a boundary line for every other emotion. My whole self was submerged in the sea of my affection—and you did not know."

"Forgive me."

"Oh, yes! Let us begin again. Let me teach you that I am not the creature for which you have mistaken me, who could give myself to the legalized crime of becoming the wife of a man whom I did not love. How little we have known each other, after all."

"But you have not heard all that I have to say. I must tell you the story of that past which ought to have belonged to you. I must—"

"No; I beg of you, don't do it. I want to feel that I have trusted you without explanation."

"But there is danger, Jerry. Think of what the future might contain."

"Nevertheless, I prefer that you should remain silent. Oh, grant me this! Let that episode be buried in the grave with her whom we both loved. I don't want you to feel that you must never speak of her to me if the inclination is upon you. I only wish that the history of that time should lie with you alone."

"It is not wise, Jerry; it is not best."

"Then let the error be mine, and gratify my whim."

"Are you afraid?"

"No; but I had rather trust you."

"I must yield; but I do it with reluctance. 'Perfect confidence casteth out fear,' you know."

She kissed him upon the lips, and he smiled his gratitude.

"You will be my wife at once, Jerry?" he asked, softly.

She shook her head.

"No," she answered; "we must each have time to recover. To become your wife now would be most unwise. We must have time to forget. We are going to begin anew, you know. I shall not expect you to play the lover to me just at first. You must teach your heart to turn to me."

"But—"

"In this I am obstinate. You hold my promise in the face of the past, Ballard; but you must wait, dear. In the summer, when the flowers are in bloom again, then, if you will have it so, I will be your wife."

"God bless you, Jerry!"

CHAPTER XV.

For some moments after their entry into the library there was a painful silence between Mrs. Shannon and Carroll, a silence which Carroll felt she dared not break, and which seemed to incense the proud woman all the more.

None of the tenderness and gentleness that had before characterized her manner was noticeable then. She was cold and hard and stern as granite, for had she not received a cruel blow in her must vulnerable point?

She took a seat upon the sofa, sitting bolt upright, with her hands crossed upon her lap, after motioning her dependent to a chair before her.

"Coralie," she said at last, her voice cold with that moisture that chills like ice, "do you think that I have deserved this treatment?"

The sweet eyes filled with tears.

"I am afraid you have misunderstood a scene which you have just witnessed, dear Mrs. Shannon," faltered the girl. "You have deserved nothing that was not most honorable from me, and I assure you—"

There was a gesture indicating a desire for silence.

"Don't add falsehood to your sin against me!" exclaimed the elder woman, even more frigidly. "It is unnecessary and hurtful. I saw enough to quite understand what has been taking place here during the hours that I have trusted both you and my son. I confess to as great a disappointment in him as in you, the fault being equal. But it seemed to me that you owed me something more than this ingratitude!"

"Mrs. Shannon, I beseech you to listen to me!" cried Carroll, in wild distress. "Upon my honor there has nothing passed between me and your son that you would have censured either of us for if you had heard all. He has acted the part of an honorable man under the influence of a most unfortunate love, while I—"

"Have betrayed the trust of a benefactress," interrupted Mrs. Shannon, her face crimsoning with anger. "I have no wish to say anything that is hard to you, Coralie; but you have at least not behaved with the ingenuousness toward me that I had the right to expect. I took you in when you were homeless and friendless, when you were in a condition in which few women would have received you, and you have repaid me by endeavoring to entrap my son into an entanglement that is a disgrace both to him and to his mother."

With a little inarticulate cry Carroll sprung to her feet. For a moment there was a flash of fire in her eyes, then she commanded her voice sufficiently to pant:

"Kind as you have been to me, Mrs. Shannon, much as I owe you, you have not the right to say such things as that to me, nor shall you. I have never tried to entrap your son into anything. I don't think I should know how, even if I were to try. When your son asked me to be his wife, he conferred an honor upon me that I appreciated with all my heart, but he did it entirely without encouragement from me."

Had Carroll been less wounded over the conversation she might have seen the white indignation of that set, proud face; but her heart was too sore to take note of outward indications.

"My son asked you to be his wife?" questioned Mrs. Shannon in a voice hard as granite.

"He did."

A sneer passed over the rigid features.

"I think you are mistaken," she said, heavily.

Carroll's sensitive lip quivered piteously.

"Don't say that, Mrs. Shannon," she cried, brokenly. "I know that I have been most unfortunate. It may be that I am far from worthy of the honor that your son conferred upon me, but he is a gentleman who respects his mother too much to offer anything less than that to a woman beneath her roof."

That Mrs. Shannon felt the rebuke keenly, her expression but too plainly indicated; but it only served to increase her pride. But while pride dominated, fear was also in the foreground of her emotions. Was it possible that Russell really contemplated a marriage with this woman of whose antecedents he knew absolutely nothing? Was it possible that he could think of her when he did not even know to a certainty that her marriage was a reality and not a sham? But if Russell had made up his mind to a step like that, should she be able to prevent the union that would mean absolute, undeniable ruin to him? For that Carroll would think of rejecting the offer that Russell Shannon would make her never even occurred to his adoring mother.

After a momentary silence and quick consideration, the sneer faded from Mrs. Shannon's countenance. Something of the kindness and gentleness to which she had accustomed Carroll, returned, but it was overshadowed by a certain decision of speech, a firmness of manner, that was not calculated to deceive.

"Perhaps you are right," she said, quietly, "and I have misjudged him; but even under those circumstances you must realize that a marriage with you would be utterly impossible for a man in his position. I don't wish to be hard upon you, I don't wish to wound you, but perfect frankness is absolutely indispensable at a time like this."

"Will you allow me one moment?" asked Carroll, some of her own pride of birth betrayed in her tone. "I would not have you for one instant believe me insensible to the

great compliment that Mr. Shannon has paid me, but I had not the remotest idea of accepting him, for I do not love him."

Mrs. Shannon stared at her in astonishment. Was it possible that the girl could be speaking the truth? At all events, policy dictated that she should accept it as such.

An expression which she intended should indicate relief, passed over her features.

"I am glad of that!" she exclaimed, earnestly. "Under those circumstances, perhaps you will not object to acting in the matter under my dictation?"

"I have none whatever."

"If Russell has this foolish thing in his head, you must realize how much better it would be for you to be no longer under the same roof with him, at least until he has recovered from the fever, so to speak."

Carroll started. A deathly pallor crept over her face. For the first time she seemed to thoroughly comprehend what this meant to her. She was to be thrown upon the world again at a time when it was hardest. She was to lose the friend who had been so much to her through no fault of her own. Friendless, helpless, with that hideous illness hanging over her that had already wrecked her life even with its frightful shadow, she was to be turned into the streets, for what fate God alone could tell. She shivered slightly, but answered with the calmness of despair:

"Yes, I see."

"That is well," returned Mrs. Shannon, with no endeavor to conceal her satisfaction. "Of course, to remove you from the house would not be of the slightest use if he were allowed to know where you had gone, but that is what we must prevent. Will you tell me what your answer was to him when he made this proposal?"

"I was too much agitated to remember either his words or my own; but it was a rejection."

"And his reply?"

Carroll hung her head for a moment, but with no desire to withhold the truth.

"He was very kind to me," she answered, tremulously. "He said that he loved me too much to accept—"

Her voice broke, and Mrs. Shannon's fingers closed spasmodically. Her son must be saved, let the cost be to another what it would.

"I understand," she said, with more coldness than before. "I think that you perceive that you owe me something of gratitude for my friendship for you in the past—a friendship which you must see was purely disinterested; do you not, Coralie?"

"I do, Heaven knows!"

"And you would do something to repay it?"

"Anything that lay within my power."

And looking into the earnest face, Mrs. Shannon could not doubt the truth of her words. There was some genuine relief in her countenance. She leaned a trifle toward Carroll and took her hand.

"I know it will be hard upon you at a time like this to go into a strange place; but you see the necessity as well as I can point it out to you. You must go away at once, without seeing Russell or allowing him to suspect that you are going. When you are gone you must be particularly careful that he does not discover you. Have I your promise that you will do this?"

"You have."

There was the anguish of death in the young voice. But what was there left for her to do? She knew that she could no longer remain in the house where her attraction had been her greatest misfortune. But what should she do under this new bitterness that was opening before her? Where should she go? And what should she do?

Mrs. Shannon seemed to read something of the horrible fear of the future that was passing through her brain.

"You need not think that I shall quite abandon you,"

she said, more kindly. "Let me see that I can trust you, and I will do all I can to assist you. I am more sorry than I can say that this has occurred; but since it has, the sooner the wrench is made, the better for us all."

"I see," said Carroll, huskily. Her eyes glazed under the suffering she was enduring. "I shall go at once. There is nothing I can say that would express my regret for what has occurred; but I swear to you that your son is as safe from me as if eternity were between us. Good-bye, and God bless you for your kindness to me! The worst pain that I endure is in the thought that you believe in my ingratitude. Some day, perhaps, you will discover that I have not deserved it. May I kiss your hand?"

She raised the jeweled fingers to her lips, held them there a moment, then, with a tremendous effort at strangling the sobs that rose in her throat, she staggered from the room.

CHAPTER XVI.

ALONE, friendless, even more hopeless than she had ever been, Carroll found herself once again in the streets, with not even the shadowy hope of trifling success that had before animated her. She was too proud to accept the assistance that Mrs. Shannon had offered her, but merely taking the money that was hers by right of earning, she left the house that she had grown to look upon almost as her home.

It seemed to her that she herself had erred in some unknown way, that God should send such distress upon her. Then she remembered how other women had suffered, and strove to be brave. But it was a weary fight. Utter desolation seemed to weigh her down—a desolation from which there seemed absolutely no escape.

And, worse than all, there was no promise in the future. It was worse than a blank, for here was the knowledge

of that other hideously shadowed, little, unknown life for which she was responsible. A wild grief like mania came upon her as she left the house. Suddenly the world became a blank. She knew nothing, cared for nothing, save the fact that she was alone and wretched. Could she have done so then, she would have called Ballard Hilliard to her at whatever cost to another.

"Why should I care?" she exclaimed aloud, as she staggered along under the gathering darkness. "Her sorrow could not be so great as mine. He would come to me. I know it—I know it! It would give my child a name—my child whom I have no right to brand with the shame that is only mine! Great God direct me! I have borne so much that I can bear no more. Have mercy upon me!"

The shades of evening were rapidly descending; a few cold stars twinkled here and there in the heavens, and a weakling moon filled the sky with a pale light that failed to reach the earth. The night was clear and cold, and numbers of pedestrians thronged the streets. She saw none of them. She was led simply by the misery that was upon her, uninfluenced by any intention whatever.

Mrs. Shannon had given her some advice as to the best place of residence during the next few weeks; but if Carroll had listened, she had already forgotten.

She paused under one of the street lamps, leaning against it for the support that her trembling limbs refused to yield, and seemed to consider.

"Which shall it be?" she asked herself, in a quivering voice, as she looked at the twinkling stars for her answer. "Which shall it be? I can bear it no longer. My strength, mental and physical, is exhausted. To send for him, or—the river? Oh, my love, my love, why did not you see all this and save me? Why could you not understand—you who knew life and its suffering—what was in store for me, and save me from the curse of our folly? You did not think! I know! I know! You loved as

blindly, as foolishly, as madly as I, and the future was veiled. You do not know the truth, or God himself could not have separated you from me. But you must know now! You must! I would bear it if I could, but I can not, and I have not the right to end it all in death!"

She paused to consider it no longer. There was an expression of wild determination in her eyes. The fire of fever was leaping in her veins.

She turned to the first person upon whom her eyes rested, and in a voice that had grown reckless and defiant, she asked:

"Can you tell me where the nearest telegraph office is?"

"Two blocks further on to the left," answered the man whom she had addressed, looking curiously at the flushed, excited face.

"Thank you!" she exclaimed, hurriedly, and started away.

But already a sensation that she could not comprehend was overcoming her. Her head had grown giddy. Her brain was reeling. She paused and pressed her hand heavily against her forehead.

"What is the matter with me?" she groaned. "Am I going blind? Great God!"

For a moment she stood there swaying to and fro. The man who had given her the information regarding the location of the telegraph office started toward her, but before he could reach her side there was a heavy fall, and she lay there quite motionless, face downward, upon the street.

An officer was crossing the street as the man raised her in his arms.

"This young lady is very sick, I am afraid, officer," the man said, gazing kindly into the beautiful face. "I think she will require an ambulance."

"Do you know her?"

"Never saw her before."

The ambulance call was sounded, and half an hour later

Carroll lay upon one of the white-draped cots in a ward of the hospital.

Three weeks afterward she opened her eyes one morning to realization.

The room was darkened and still as death, but she felt a presence beside her. She put out her hand curiously, feeling under the influence of a dream rather than a reality. It touched that of a man. She drew back with a slight cry.

"Who are you?" she whispered, faintly. "And where am I?"

Before replying, the young man rose and opened the shutters a trifle, letting in a ray of light. Then he returned to his seat beside her.

"You are in a hospital," he answered, gently. "You have been very ill, but we hope that will all be over soon now. I am one of your physicians."

"How long have I been ill?"

"About three weeks; but you must not ask any questions at all, only lie very quietly, and be obedient. That is not always easy when one is overrun with curiosity, I am quite aware, but self-control is necessary, you know."

He smiled down upon her as he might have done had she been a child, but there was little of an answering one in her eyes.

"Wait!" she cried. "There are some things that I must know. As a physician you will understand that the worry of it all would do more to retard my recovery than a trifling exertion could possibly do. Tell me something of myself, and I will try to be as quiet as you could desire. How came I here?"

"You fell in the street, and an ambulance brought you here."

A faint degree of memory seemed to come to her. She opened her lips to speak, but he motioned her to silence.

"If you do that I shall leave you at once!" exclaimed

the young man. "There is just one thing that we would like for you to tell us, for we have been unable to learn anything whatever from you. What is your name? And at what address can we communicate with your husband?"

An expression of relief, and at the same time a flush of shame, crossed Carroll's face. The relief came from the knowledge that in her delirium she had betrayed nothing; but her voice was quiet as she replied:

"I am Mrs. Mills. My husband is—dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"Forgive me. You spoke of him many times, but only as Ballard. We could tell nothing from that, you know. There, now, I am going to leave you. Try to sleep, and to-morrow I shall have a pleasant surprise for you."

He closed the shutter again and left her there in the darkness. At first it seemed to her that she could never sleep until her mind was at rest upon other points; but there was no one to ask, and her weakness overcame her at last. She slept—slept for many hours sweetly and quietly—awaking only in the morning when the nurse stood over her and the sunlight was streaming into the room.

The woman smiled pleasantly.

"There!" she exclaimed, "that has done you a world of good! Why, you are so greatly improved that you appear almost well!"

"I feel almost well. Tell me—"

"Not a word. The doctor will be here presently, and you shall satisfy your curiosity all you like, but at present I am dumb. Ah! here he is now. Doctor Winter, your patient is greatly improved."

"That is good. How are you, Mrs. Mills? There is a visitor for you this morning."

"For me?"

"Yes. Would you like to see her?"

The color surged into Carroll's face.

"Who is she?"

"Some one whom you have never seen. Don't excite yourself, little woman. Perhaps I should not have told you yet; but you know even doctors are not always as discreet as they should be. It seemed to me that it might be pleasant for you to have a companion, now that you are recovering."

His hand was smoothing her brow very gently; her eyes held his; her breath was coming quick and in little pants.

"You mean—"

She could not finish the sentence, and the doctor turned to the nurse, who had left the room a moment before, and was returning with a little bundle in her arms.

"I mean your little daughter, whose acquaintance you have not yet formed, Mrs. Mills," he said, very gently.

Carroll held out her arms in breathless silence. The little creature was put into them.

For some time she held the tiny face pressed closely against her own, then her lips moved and they heard her murmur:

"Ballard's baby and mine! God bless my little Princess!"

CHAPTER XVII.

The art world of New York was in an uproar.

Ballard Hilliard's new painting had been given to the public, and where before it had loudly praised his talent, it went further now, calling it genius, and comparing him with the old masters, whose work had lived through ages. His everlasting fame was made, and he knew it.

It is difficult to describe his sensations under the glory that had come after the months of toil. It had been a labor of love with him; his whole heart had been in his work, and yet, under the attendant prestige, after the success of which he had dreamed and for which he had

labored, there was a sense of something missing—that something which would never come to him again in life.

He blamed himself alone for the death of Carroll. He looked upon himself as much her murderer as if his hand had hurled the train that bore her into eternity, and his grief was something that never could be buried.

Not that he ever uttered a word of his sorrow to any living being; but it was there, poisoning all his life, forbidding even the prospect of happiness. He knew that he had acted the part of a coward in not telling the truth to both those pure women who loved him; but it was too late for regret to avail anything. The little that lay in his power was to make Geraldine Kingman as happy as he could, and Heaven knows it was little enough that he could do, with that dead heart lying like a lump of lead in his bosom.

The congratulations that he was receiving upon all sides made the memory of Carroll particularly alive in his heart again, for it was the portrait that he had painted of her that had brought his world-wide fame; and as he sat before his easel, thinking of those sweet, dead days when she had been there beside him, when he had been unable to work because of the tumult of love that was raging in his breast, he rose suddenly, passing his hand before his eyes to free them from the tears that were blinding him.

"I must forget you, my darling!" he whispered to himself, knowing at the time that he was asking an impossibility of his heart. "I must forget you. It is unjust to my promised wife that I should remember like this —that I should live in the thought of the past. And yet I can't—I can't! It is the punishment of God for my sin that I can not!"

He walked over to the window and stood there, gazing sadly, dreamily over the tops of the buildings toward the distant river, deaf to all sound, blind to the outward world, when some one touched his elbow.

He started slightly and turned. The noble face of his betrothed wife was beside him.

"Dreaming, Ballard?" she asked, gently. "Ah, dear, you are living too much in your success. You are too ambitious. Do you not remember the advice that was given to Cromwell? You are forgetting everything but this thirsting for fame. It pleases me more than you can think to hear the world singing your praises; but, dear, there is something in life besides that."

He placed both his hands upon her shoulders and looked down sadly into her face.

"I know it, Jerry," he answered, unconscious of the pathos of his voice; "I know it. I saw success through a halo. What a mistake it was! It has turned to Dead Sea fruit upon my lips."

Miss Kingman's face grew pale.

"You are so unhappy, then?" she asked, not reproachfully, but miserably.

He saw that he had wounded her.

"Don't let us misunderstand each other, Jerry!" he exclaimed, more lightly. "Life is not such a horror as some of us would try to make it, if we only see the right side of it. I realize that I have been living too much in my work. I find that it does not contain all of living, by any means. I have been selfish with it, and I am just awakening to the fact. Jerry, did you think that my thirst for fame had made me forget what I owe you?"

"Not that, Ballard; but it seemed to me that you were forgetting yourself in it. You don't realize it, but your health is failing. You have grown pale and thin; your eyes have lost their brilliancy. See, your hand trembles as it rests upon my shoulder. You need rest and change."

He looked at her a moment earnestly, then said:

"When you are ready to go with me, Jerry, I will take the rest you prescribe. Until then I must work."

She shrunk from him just a trifle.

"Don't ask me to do that, dear; at least, just yet. It seems to me that you would be better without me for awhile. I seem to remind you of the past. If you will not go, Ballard, then I shall for a little while. I have had an invitation to visit Philadelphia for a few weeks, and I think I shall go. If you find that you need me, come for me and I shall return at once."

She was looking at him longingly, yearningly, unconscious that she was betraying herself in her words, unconscious that he could read the desire underlying her expression, that he should come for her because he could not get along without her. But he understood, as a man always does who does not love the woman as she loves him, and a sigh escaped him.

"To whom are you going?" he asked, quietly.

"To Mrs. Shannon. You remember, do you not? She was an old friend of my mother. You have met her."

"Yes, I know, and I have met her son. Are you quite sure that you will not forget me, Jerry?"

The question pleased her.

"You know that I shall not."

"I shall come for you, dear, unless you return by the end of the week. Life will be very dreary and dismal without you."

He said the words as if he meant them, and hope arose in her heart.

"Ballard," she said, gently, "I am afraid it is very dreary and dismal for you, anyway; but oh, believe me, it will be different by and by. One can't go on remembering forever. I never intended to speak to you of the past again, but there is just one question that I should like to ask you, and then we will bury it forever. Have I your permission?"

"Ask anything you will."

"Then why was it that you never married her, dear?"

There was a painful silence for a moment, then in a voice which she never forgot, he replied:

"She would not have me."

Miss Kingman started.

The answer seemed to put an entirely new phase upon the situation to her. Suddenly she remembered that Carroll had told her she loved some one so intensely. Up to that moment she believed it to have been Ballard Hilliard, but how could that have been true if she had declined to be his wife? She thought she saw it all then. She thought she understood the misery that had ruined the young artist's life. It was that he had loved without reciprocation. It made everything seem so plain to her. Carroll had evidently eloped with the lover of whom she had spoken to her, with the sad ending of death. And, in consequence, she pitied Ballard Hilliard more than ever.

She put up her hands and took his face between her palms.

"Forgive me!" she whispered. "I have misjudged you, but it did not make me love you any the less. I understand better now. We will never speak of it again, please. I am going to-morrow, Ballard. Will you take me to the train?"

"If you will promise me to remain but a week. Dear heart, you are very necessary to me now. I wonder if you understand how I appreciate your love? I wonder if you realize how grateful I am for the kindness you have shown me? Ah, Jerry, you are something more than a woman! You are an angel!"

A few days later he went with her to the train, and kissed her good-bye upon the platform.

"Only one week, remember!" he said, as he left her to watch the train pull out.

"Dear Ballard!" she murmured almost happily, as she saw him reach the ground in safety. "I don't think he

quite realizes it himself, but he is learning to love me. Thank God for that! Life is beginning in earnest at last, and I am really to know what happiness means."

She settled herself back in her parlor-chair, concealing her eyes because they contained tears that were not those of misery. She had been very wretched of late, but she felt that the sun was very closely behind the cloud now, ready to burst forth with that grandeur with which it had never yet shone for her.

She lived in a happy dream—and the future was veiled! Was it best?

CHAPTER XVIII.

"DOCTOR WINTER, I have come to say good-bye!"

Carroll stood at the door of the young doctor's private room, pale, but beautiful as a dream after the severe illness through which she had passed. Her hair had been cut short and curled about her head, giving her the appearance of a nimbus-crowned saint. In her arms she held the tiny reproduction of herself that was at once the joy and shame of her young life.

Dr. Winter rose from the medical pamphlets he had been studying.

"You are not really going, Mrs. Mills, are you?" he asked, with genuine regret in his fine eyes.

"Yes," she answered, endeavoring to smile, but in reality giving her lovely countenance a sadder expression than before. "I have been discharged from the hospital, you know."

"In one sense I am glad, for it shows that you are cured; but I shall miss you sadly, little woman. I hope it is into a happier life that you are going."

He had taken her hand and was looking down into her face with a sincere interest that was not love, and she read

it aright. She was more grateful for his friendship than words could have expressed.

"God knows!" she answered, simply. "It has been hard enough so far, and yet, perhaps I should not complain, because He has blessed me with good friends."

"I hope you count me among the number?"

"I should be more than ungrateful did I not. I have come to thank you for all your kindness to me. It has been greater than I had a right to expect from any physician. If it were not presuming I should call it brotherly."

"And I do feel so, little woman. I am deeply interested in you, and I should appreciate it as the very greatest favor if you would allow me to see you sometimes. You know I am the godfather of the little Princess, and you have not the right to keep me from her."

There was a smile in his eyes, and Carroll understood perfectly the kindness of his intention.

Tears choked her utterance for a moment, but she found voice at last to reply:

"It would seem a little less like going into a life that is cruelly new if I knew that I should see you occasionally."

"Then you may be sure that you shall. Perhaps you are not aware of it, but I myself am situated somewhat as you are. I am alone in the world. Of course, I realize that it is nothing for a man compared with what it is for a woman; but it is not easy for either to know that there is absolutely no one who belongs to him or her—that there is no one upon whose sympathy one can depend. It will establish a bond between us that will create a friendship, if it has not already done so, Mrs. Mills. Have you decided yet what you shall do?"

She shook her head.

"There is so little that I can do," she answered, drearily. "My little Princess will prevent my taking the place of even a servant, I am afraid. The nurses tell me

that there is little hope of a woman with a child. It looks very like starvation, I am afraid."

"Oh, not so bad as that. You must not despair. You are too young for that. And you must always remember that God helps those who help themselves. Let me see; where is it that you are going?"

"I have secured a little room just at first in the home of a friend of one of the nurses. It is very small, very forlorn, but it is the best that I can do."

"Suppose you allow me to call there this evening and let us talk over the future. Let us see if it looks quite so hopeless as you seem to think. There is always an avenue of escape to those who are willing to find it."

"I am afraid it will be a poor place to which to ask you to come."

"I shall not mind that."

"It is so good of you. You must not resent my hesitation, or think me lacking in gratitude, but there is a singular fatality following me. It is that I lose any one who has been my friend in some horribly dramatic way that never fails to affect my life, as well as that of the one who has liked me. I am half afraid to accept your friendship, lest I bring upon you some hideous evil.'

Dr. Winter laughed.

"Why, what a superstitious little thing you are, to be sure!" he exclaimed, with genuine amusement. "And do you really believe that to be true?"

"I do."

There was such earnestness in the reply, such earnestness in the face that was raised to his, that he gently pressed the hand he held, the laughter dying out of his eyes.

"Well, we will prove that it is not true. We will explode your bugbear. I am going to be your friend, and nothing is going to happen to me out of the ordinary, either. Don't think that I am tempting fate by any un-

due boldness; but I am quite sure that God never sent such a scourge as that into any woman's life. The results that you have observed have been merely those of accident."

"I hope that it is true."

"You must not doubt it. It is like questioning the mercy of Heaven. I shall see you in your new home to-night. How well the baby looks!"

"Very."

"She is singularly like you. I don't think I ever saw a more striking resemblance."

"God help her!"

"Come, come, child! You must not give way to gloomy reflections like that. You have had a great sorrow, to be sure, but other women have had them also. You are not alone in your chastisement. It is not the correct thing to sit down and grieve. You must be up and doing. I hope to find you in a better frame of mind when I call to-night. Cheer up, little woman. Remember that you have the little Princess to live for now, and that you must be able to save her from the sorrows that your own life has contained."

A pain that was like white anguish came to Carroll's face. The thought he had expressed had never come to her before, and it entered her soul like a red-hot iron. She pressed the little form closer to her, as if by her great love she would protect the little creature from all harm through life.

Then Dr. Winter bent his noble head above the baby.

"Good-bye, little one," he said, in that cooing fashion that one unconsciously uses to infancy. "Keep mamma's spirits up until this evening, when we will have a chance to look the future squarely in the face."

He pressed Carroll's hand again, and smiling through her tears, she gave him the required address and left him.

She had already said her farewell to the others in the

hospital whose acquaintance she had formed, and with the direction from the nurse as to the locality of her friend's residence clasped in her hand, she left the house.

The air was chill, but it seemed to brace her courage for the unknown existence that was before her. For the third time she was apparently commencing life anew, yet because of the promise of Harry Winter she felt less lonely, less utterly forlorn, than upon either of the other occasions; and then, too, there was that little life that had come to her, and which was all her own.

She looked down into the tiny face with a wild adoration as that thought filled her heart.

"My little one, my darling!" she whispered, "we will face it together, you and I. Some day you will know the story of your mother's life. Will you forgive her then, or curse her? Will you say to me then, as my mother said, 'Death is better than shame?' Oh, my little one, if I can ever make you understand how I loved him, how I love him still, you would forgive me! Had I the right to brand you like this, even for the sake of that woman who had been our only friend? But it is too late now. The harm is done. The disgrace is upon us both, reaching high as heaven, stretching through eternity. I can but abide now by the decision that I have made. God forgive me, my little Princess!"

She raised the child's face to her lips, even there in the street as she was, and pressed a passionate kiss upon it.

She was terribly white, her countenance traced with lines of sorrow; but there was a lady observing her who failed to notice that.

She was coming down the street in the direction of the hospital, when something in the young mother's movements attracted her. She looked again. The face was bent, the hair beneath the closely fitting hat was short, yet there was something strangely familiar in the appearance. A cry arose to the woman's lips, but froze there. She

watched until the white face was raised, standing there as if rooted to the spot; then, when Carroll had approached her, she put out her hand and grasped the girl's arm.

"Carroll!" she gasped.

The girl raised her eyes. There was a quick recoil, a low, panting cry, and but for the other's quickness the baby would have fallen to the earth.

"You—Miss Kingman!" she whispered, in a voice whose hoarseness made it horrible.

"What are you doing here?" panted the elder woman. "What is the meaning of this? How came it that we read of your death in the paper? And, for the love of Heaven, tell me, whose child is this?"

CHAPTER XIX.

For a moment there was stupid silence upon Carroll's part. She stood there apparently half conscious, gazing into the face of the woman for whose sake she had made the most heroic sacrifice that ever came into any life.

She tried to shake herself together, to think what it was required that she should say; but her brain seemed paralyzed under the shock. She might have known that this was one of those accidents that happen in every life, and so have been prepared, but the thought had never been even remotely presented to her. She tried to speak some words, but could think of nothing connectedly, then put out her arms and whispered, hoarsely:

"Give me the child and let me go!"

"Not until you have told me what all this means!" exclaimed Miss Kingman, almost passionately. "How came you by this child? Whose is she that she looks so like you? Answer me, Carroll! What is the meaning of it all, and where is your husband?"

The girl shrunk back without replying, her eyes wild,

like those of a hunted animal brought to bay. Her fingers were pressed upon her lips, as if holding back by force the fierce agony that threatened to escape them.

And then Geraldine Kingman's manner changed, and in a tone of persuasion, she exclaimed:

"Have I not always been your friend, Carroll? Can you not trust me now?"

Then all the memory of that past came back to the unhappy girl with hideous oppression.

"You have been!" she cried, in a voice that Miss Kingman did not know. "God knows you have been, but I need your friendship now more than ever before. Have pity upon me and let me go! Ask me no questions, for I tell you that already my life is harder than I can endure. If you ever cared for me, let me be as dead to those whom I have loved and who have loved me as if indeed I occupied the grave that was dug for me. If you have any pity, let me go!"

During the speech Geraldine Kingman's face had softened and changed. She was again the great-hearted, charitable, noble woman that had brightened and cheered the lives of Carroll and both her parents. She had put aside self, and remembered only the sorrows of others.

"And if I refuse to do that, dear child," she said, gently, "you know that it is for your good alone. Carroll, let me help you. Trust me with the story of your life. Do you think that I should desert you because of a misfortune? Perhaps—perhaps I know more of the grief that has come into your life than—"

"No, no, no! You don't! You are wrong—utterly and entirely wrong. No one knows—no one, save God and my own heart. It is not wise or generous of you to suspect anything that you do not know. For the love of Heaven, go away and leave me!"

The words were uttered so wildly, so pleadingly, that tears came to Miss Kingman's eyes; nor were they of sym-

pathy alone. There was something else—some other feeling finding room in her breast, and it was one of great thankfulness that what she had at first feared was false. Some thought that Ballard Hilliard might be concerned in this terrible shame had come to her with sickening force, but she suddenly remembered what he had said to her of the reason why he did not marry Carroll, and the words of the latter had confirmed it.

While, therefore, her heart was alive with sympathy for the girl whom she had loved in a happier past, there was also a thanksgiving that the man whom she loved was innocent of wrong.

The woman of fashion held the pauper child close to her breast.

"I can't do that, Carroll," she said, gently. "Is that living up to the command of God? Dear, I don't want to hurt you, but your manner leaves but one thing for me to believe. Try to understand what I mean without my speaking the cruel words. But your misfortune does not warrant my leaving you. Oh, Carroll, dear child! how you must have suffered! How bitterly hard your life must have been when you could leave home and friends in the manner you have done, leaving them to mourn you as dead! Why did not you trust me, child? Why did not you come to me in your terrible trouble? Did you think that I should be the first to cast a stone? Did you think that I should have turned my back upon you because you had been so cruelly betrayed?"

The kindness, the gentleness, the tenderness were wringing Carroll's heart as no reproaches could ever have done. Violent sobs were rising in her throat. The anguish in her eyes was horrible.

"Don't!" she cried. "I have borne all that I can, and you are breaking my heart. If I have sinned, God knows that I have expiated by suffering, for there are no words to tell what I have endured; but if you have any

pity, for the love of Heaven leave me as dead to the world as I now am! Don't make all the sacrifice of my life useless! Promise me that you will tell no one—no one at all—that you have seen me! Oh, in pity, promise!"

"But your mother, Carroll? Have you no thought of her?"

"It is for her sake that I ask it. I am better dead than that my shame should become public. She could not bear it. She is proud—terribly proud. It would kill her to know that I—have become a—mother before I am a—wife!"

The sentence was barely audible, and Miss Kingman shivered.

"Oh, Carroll! Carroll!" she moaned.

"Hush! For God's sake, have pity upon me! Give me the child and let me go. Of all the anguish I have endured, this is the worst. Tell me, is she well? Has she become reconciled?"

"No; nor never will."

"You see her sometimes, do you not? You are kind to her as in the old days?"

"Often. I try to be almost a daughter to her. And, Carroll, she has one who is almost a son—who thinks of her first and cares for her. She has grown to love him, and to call upon him in her extremities. She may be proud—almost hard to some—but she never is so to him. He has been so kind, so generous, so thoughtful, dear. Have you no word for him? Is it your wish that he, too, should think you dead? Carroll—"

What it cost the noble woman to speak those words no pen could tell. Her heart ached with a poignancy that went beyond expression, but the break in her speech was occasioned by the low, throbbing cry that issued from the white lips of her listener.

"For the love of God, spare me!" she gasped. "You

can not desire to add torture to my suffering. Can't you see that every word you utter is the most cruel stab? Can't you see that it enters my heart like a knife? If you would do me the only kindness that lies in your power, say no more. Give me my helpless child and let me go out of your life forever. Speak of me to no one. Promise me that you will do that, Miss Kingman, in the name of pity!"

"I promise."

"God bless you!"

Something of the horror faded from the beautiful eyes. The white lips trembled; great, scalding tears poured over the ghastly face. She stretched forth her arms and took the baby from her friend, hugging it closely to her own desolate breast.

"Good-bye," she whispered, hoarsely, "and forget me as quickly as you can."

"You mean that you will not let me see you, Carroll?"

"It would be better not. Don't think me ungrateful. Forgive me and let it be farewell forever!"

She looked into the face of her old-time friend once, longingly, hungrily, then staggered away without a backward glance, the old battle to be fought again, the old struggle renewed a thousand-fold.

Miss Kingman looked after her.

"Poor child!" she muttered. "How she suffers! She was innocent, helpless, and she loved. Is not the punishment too great? Ah! surely it is not right that I should yield to her supplication. It may be better that she should remain dead to the others, but at least I have not the moral right to abandon her, even at her wish. I will know where she goes. I will give her time to recover from the first shock of knowing that I have discovered her shame, and then I will go to her again. She will let me help her—I know she will. And at least I shall have the consolation of knowing that she is not unprovided for.

How poor and miserable she looks! poor, helpless, suffering child!"

Still continuing her reflections of sympathy, which were not unmixed with a feeling of gratitude that Ballard Hilliard had had nothing to do with the grief that had come into the young life, she followed Carroll at a safe distance until she had entered the home the kind-hearted nurse had suggested, then very slowly she went home.

During the remainder of the afternoon she could not recover from the shock that the encounter had given her. She wanted to see Carroll again; she wanted to make some change for the better in that afflicted life; and, unable to bear it any longer, she turned after dinner to the son of her hostess, and said:

"Russell, may I not ask a favor of you? I met an old acquaintance in the street to-day. She was very poor, very forlorn, and I can not get her out of my mind. I want to see her again, and I want you to take me to her door, and wait until I come out. Is it asking too much? Shall it be too great a bore?"

"Not at all," he answered, rising at once to do her bidding.

And together they went out to that humble street where Miss Kingman knew that Carroll lived.

She had carefully jotted down the number in her memory, and as they approached the house—a small, ramshackle frame dwelling — Miss Kingman involuntarily glanced in at one of the windows. Russell Shannon followed the direction of her eye.

There were no shades at the window, or, if there were, they were not drawn; and inside the room they distinctly saw Carroll standing before a man whose back was to them. She was smiling into his face, with an expression that was easily mistakable. His head was bent over the baby that lay in his arms, as his mustached lips pressed a light kiss upon the tiny mouth.

Miss Kingman was startled by a groan.

She glanced hurriedly at the man at her side. He was white as death and rigid as iron. She grasped his arm with almost frantic haste.

"Come," she exclaimed. "Let us go quickly! Merciful Heaven! it is worse than I had dreamed. It would have been much better if she had really died—much better!"

CHAPTER XX.

GRASPING the arm of Russell Shannon spasmodically, Geraldine Kingman almost forced him from the contemplation of that scene that had well-nigh robbed him of the power of thought.

His mother had not been overtruthful in her account to him of Carroll's manner of leaving her house, telling him —which was strictly true in one sense—that she did not know where Carroll was going, but leaving him to infer that she had done all that lay in her power to persuade the girl to remain beneath her roof. It was, therefore, a shock from which he could not quite recover when he saw the girl whom he had believed to be peculiarly friendless, alone in her room at night with a man who held her child, and into whose face she looked with such affection and confidence.

He did not speak during their homeward walk, and it was not until they again stood in the center of his mother's drawing-room that he turned to Geraldine.

His face was white and rigid, the lines about his mouth drawn and distorted. She would scarcely have recognized the voice in which he spoke to her.

"Will you tell me where you knew that young woman?" he asked, as quietly as he could force himself to speak.

"I have known her for years in New York, where she lived."

"And—that man with her. Who was he?"

"I don't know. I never saw him before."

"Will you tell me what you can of her history?"

"I have known her, as I tell you, for years, and yet there is very little further that I can tell you. I have always been interested in her, perhaps because of her singular beauty, but I also knew her father, who was an artist, and her mother, who, though poor, was one of the most perfect ladies I have ever seen. They were very, very much impoverished at the death of her father, but I always believed Carroll to be one of the purest girls."

"Carroll?"

"That is her name."

"Go on, please."

"Her mother was in delicate health, and Carroll worked early and late like a slave to take care of her. Their devotion to each other was something beautiful to witness. There was a gentleman in New York, rich, handsome, and of good family, who loved Carroll, and would have married her, but she did not care for him. No one suspected that there was any one who had won her heart. I am sure that her mother did not, and I, who was her nearest friend, did not. Then one day she disappeared. It was the night of the terrible storm, when the Hudson River disaster occurred. All night we searched for her, not knowing what had happened and dreading the worst. The next morning we read in the paper that she was among the killed in that frightful wreck. We buried a body that we believed to be hers, and mourned her as dead. To-day I met her upon the street—with a child in her arms!"

The voice ceased. Russell Shannon had already dropped upon a chair and covered his ghastly face with his hands. Until that moment he had scarcely suspected himself how dear Carroll had become to him. Miss Kingman was looking down upon him in pity and amazement. She

stood silent for some moments, then she placed her hand gently, timidly upon his shoulder.

"What have I done in taking you there?" she questioned, sadly. "I did not know that you had ever met before."

His hands dropped. She never forgot the countenance that was lifted to her own.

"How could you have known?" he said, hoarsely. "Forgive me if I have added to your distress. There is just one question that I should like to ask: Are you sure that she was never married?"

"To my knowledge she never was; but recent events have proven how little I know. Will you not tell me, Russell, what Carroll is to you?"

"Nothing but the lost love of my life. She might have been my wife had she so desired."

"Great heavens!"

"Is it so strange? Ah, she is young, scarcely more than a child, and she is pure! She knows nothing else, could be nothing else! There is some horrible secret that I shall make it my business to discover. She is friendless, helpless, and in spite of her misfortune I love her still. I shall find out this thing that has ruined her beautiful young existence, and then the scoundrel that has betrayed her shall pay for it with his cowardly life!"

He had risen, his face working with excitement.

"Hush!" exclaimed Miss Kingman, her eyes luminous with fear. "You must not talk like that! Remember, you have other interests in life. There is your mother!"

"It is because I remember her that I am determined that justice shall be done! It is because I have some regard left for purity and innocence that I am determined that this scoundrel shall pay the penalty of his dastardly crime. Do you think the fault was hers? I tell you that I know her, and that she is pure as an angel!"

He picked up his hat as he ceased speaking, a hideous determination expressed in his eyes.

Miss Kingman sprung forward and placed her hand upon his arm detainingly.

"Where are you going?" she gasped.

"Back there!"

"For what?"

"To find that villain!"

"But you may be mistaken."

"I am not! I felt it as I looked at him. He shall make her an honest woman, and then—God help him if he attempts to injure her further!"

"You don't know what you are doing! You must not go there in this condition."

"And yet I tell you that I will!"

"But think, Russell! Give yourself time. If what you fear is true, you will have ample time—"

"There is no time like the present."

"But you must not go there! If you insist, then I shall accompany you."

"That is foolish."

"No more so than your act. Give it up. Wait until to-morrow; then call upon Carroll while she is alone, if you will."

"She would refuse to see me, and even if she should not, she would still conceal the identity of that rascal from me. She is alone in the world, and friendless. Ah, Jerry, you don't know what you are talking about! Place yourself in her position. Undoubtedly she loves him and will protect him at the risk of her own good name, or even life itself. Do you think I did not see when she was here beneath our roof, as she was for several months, how she suffered? Do you think I did not know how tired she was of life? I think that is the first thing that ever turned my heart to her. I saw the struggle that she was making. Not that I suspected what it was. I thought that she had

lost her husband and that she was grieving for him, and ah, God! how I pitied her! But I see it all now. Poor, helpless, innocent child! And yet you tell me that I must see her betrayer escape me, and make no effort to prevent it? Never!"

"But what shall you do?"

"Go there! Meet him face to face! Wring the truth from them both, and then compel him to marry her! That is what I shall do!"

"And if he refuses?"

"Then—"

Shannon did not complete the sentence, but there was an expression upon his face that made further words unnecessary. Miss Kingman shivered, but her terror did not prevent her from taking a sudden resolution.

"You shall not go there in your present state of mind, Russell," she said, firmly.

"Who will prevent me?"

"I will!"

"You?"

"I!"

"How?"

"By entreating that you do not in the first place, and if you still refuse to listen to the voice of reason, then I will have you locked up until you have regained your senses."

"You will have me locked up? I think not. What do you mean?"

"That I shall have you arrested! Listen to me, Russell. A man that will do that horrible thing of which you accuse that guest of Carroll's, is a desperate one. In your present state you have no reason whatever. You must wait until you are in a fit condition to go there—or I shall prevent it at any cost!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THERE was not a doubt in the mind of Russell Shannon but that Geraldine Kingman meant every word to which she had given utterance.

There was a set determination in her face that was not to be mistaken. He was firmly convinced that she would go to any length to carry her point in her fear for his safety, and because she believed herself in a great measure responsible for it in that she had taken him to that house.

There was, therefore, nothing that he could do but sit down and bear as best he could that horrible feeling that was as indescribable as it was hideous. Russell Shannon was every inch a man, and therefore did not hesitate to acknowledge himself vanquished by a woman.

He looked at her for a time in absolute silence, then with a groan threw himself into a chair.

He knew that he must not, for Carroll's sake as well as his own, get that odious matter in the columns of the newspapers, and any disturbance that Miss Kingman might make would have but that result.

"You women are as hard as iron to each other," he said, doggedly. "You pretend to have loved this child, and yet when I would right the wrong that has been done her, you put an obstacle in my way that I can not surmount. It is like the inconsistency of your sex."

"You have not the right to say that!" cried Miss Kingman, passionately. "There is no sacrifice that I would not make if I could but wipe the shame from Carroll Millbourne's name—if I could but return her to her mother as pure as we both believed her at the time that she left her home; but in the state that you now are you would but make a bad matter worse. Go to her to-morrow, if you will, say to her what you desire, and act in the matter

as you see fit, but I owe it to your mother that I prevent your going there to-night. You may think of me as hardly as you will, but when this feeling has worn away you will see that I am right and you are wrong."

There was not the slightest indication of weakening in her manner, and Shannon knew that the case was hopeless. He saw that it was useless to try to do anything with her, either by persuasion or otherwise; and then by careful questioning he succeeded in obtaining the most minute history of Carroll's life, save the part that related to Ballard Hilliard. That, for both their sakes, Miss Kingman carefully concealed.

When she left him it was too late for him to be able to see either Carroll or the man who had been in her room, and thinking to gain strength for the following day, he retired to his room, endeavoring to sleep; but it was a useless undertaking. All night he lay staring up at the ceiling, making plans and rejecting them, until when the morning came he seemed further from a knowledge of what should be done in the premises than upon the preceding night.

He felt sore toward Miss Kingman that she had prevented his returning to that house, as under those circumstances he would undoubtedly have discovered the identity of the man who had occasioned that suffering in the life of the woman whom he had loved; for that the man he had seen was the one, he did not even remotely doubt. Still he would act cautiously, he told himself, and there would yet be ample opportunity.

He avoided any conversation with Miss Kingman after breakfast that morning, though she was obviously most anxious to speak with him; but taking his hat, he walked out of the house with bent head, walking in the direction of the little dwelling where he had received such a mental blow the night before.

There was a wretched strip of ragged curtain shading

the windows upon that occasion, but the alteration did not blind him to the fact that the house was the same.

The expression of his face was most peculiar as he paused before seeking admission. There was dogged determination in every line, but there was also a deathless pain, a sense of intense disappointment that the woman who had won from him his very soul was unworthy of the gift; for let the misfortune that surrounded her be great as it would, she had grossly deceived both him, and his mother, who had been her friend. Yet that did not alter his resolution to do for her all that lay in his power.

He saw now quite clearly the necessity for carefulness on his part, and something almost like gratitude to Miss Kingman came to him for the action that she had taken upon the night before.

He pulled a knob upon the door. The unmusical sound of a cracked bell was heard in the hall, and a little later the door was opened by a slatternly looking girl.

"There is a lady here with a child," he said to the girl, "whom—"

She did not give him time to complete his sentence.

"You mean Mrs. Mills?" she asked.

"Yes. May I see her?"

"Yes, sir. Will you walk in?"

Shannon hesitated but a moment. He had not been exactly accustomed to being invited into a lady's room, as the manner of the girl plainly showed he was to be then, without the lady's permission; but as he quickly reflected that Carroll must decline to see him should he send his card, he concluded to conform to the regulations of that class of society and do as was indicated that he should. He therefore followed the girl, who had already tapped upon the door of the room that he knew to be the one occupied by Carroll.

A faint voice from within bid the applicant for admis-

sion enter, and Shannon waited until he heard the girl announce:

"A gentleman to see you, ma'am!"

Then without permission he stepped beside her into the room and closed the door behind him.

The picture that greeted him caused the hot blood to rise to his brow, and yet it was one that artists have declared to be beautiful. It was that young mother carefully, gently rocking the child who slept as she held it to her bosom. There was a low exclamation from the pallid lips of the unhappy girl, a moment of paralyzed inactivity, then without a word she rose, placed the sleeping child upon the bed, and turned to her guest.

"Why have you submitted me to this humiliation?" she asked, in a quivering voice. "Don't you think that my suffering has been great enough already?"

Every feeling but pity and love died from his breast. With that exquisite face before him he would have given up life itself for her and to save her honor.

He took her hand tenderly, and looking down into her eyes said, with an intensity that touched her to the soul:

"Do you think you have the right to speak to me like that? Have I ever shown a desire toward you save to lighten and brighten your life? Do you think that I should have come here for any reason under God's heavens except a yearning to benefit you, to see you happier? Oh, child, how little you have appreciated my affection!"

Tears rose to her eyes.

"Forgive me!" she cried, contritely. "I think my great suffering has made me mad sometimes. You have never been anything but the kindest of friends to me, and I have deserved it so little. Yet why have you come?"

"To tell you that my love for you is unchanged; to beg of you—"

A flash of agony crossed her face.

"Oh, hush, I beg of you!" she exclaimed, dully.

"You are only making it a thousand times harder for me! You don't understand! If you but knew the thing I am, you would despise me. Don't force me to tell you the story that would burn my tongue to speak. Love can never be anything but a curse to me!"

"It is you who do not understand," he exclaimed, leading her to a rickety chair and leaning over her as his tender hand smoothed her hair. "Dear, would it pain you to know that I have heard the story of your life?"

She started up with a little panting gasp.

"What!" she whispered, her eyes darkening with shame.

"Oh, little one, why did not you trust me long ago? Why could you not have told me the story of your betrayed life? Did you think me so little of a man that I would not have helped you? Did you think me so small of soul that I should not have understood your temptation and pitied you? Did you not know that, loving you as I did, I should have forced the contemptible scoundrel who did you this great wrong to right it so far as lay in his power?"

Her head had sunk forward upon her breast, and dry, tearless sobs were shaking her tender frame. Russell Shannon knelt beside her. She was speaking to him, but in a tone so low that he could scarcely catch the utterance.

"Who has told you this?" she asked, dully.

"One who loves you very dearly. She did not tell me except to benefit you. It was Miss Geraldine Kingman."

Carroll shivered.

"What did she tell you?"

"The whole story of your wrecked life."

"Did she—name the person who—"

"No, because she did not know. But you will tell me that, Carroll—you will tell me the truth, will you not, dear? I shall act only as your brother would do, had you one."

"And that is—"

"You are too good to be the wife of such a man, but it is the only way to save your good name and that of your child. I will compel him to marry you."

She rose slowly, every particle of life seeming suddenly to have forsaken her. Her face was cold as death. She stood there before him, rigid as iron.

"I see you have not heard all the truth," she said, slowly. "It was I who refused to marry the man who loved me. I beg of you to keep this to yourself. I entreat that you tell it to no one, not even to Miss Kingman, who has been the kindest friend I ever knew; but it is quite true. Now leave me to my fate!"

Russell Shannon rose from his knees. He looked helplessly at her for a moment, then said:

"I see. You are trying to shield the scoundrel; but I will discover him, and—"

It was useless to complete the sentence. The expression of his countenance was sufficient.

CHAPTER XXII.

CARROLL was too much stunned to observe the threatening countenance, even had Russell Shannon not turned his face from her.

It seemed to her that the past two days had been the very hardest ones to bear in all her sorely tried life. She was peculiarly alive to the terrible wrong that she had done her child, and that, coupled with the awful agony of shame that she had been forced to endure, was almost more than she could bear. The wonder to her was that her reason remained; but it seemed only a part of her punishment that it should be so.

She had not even heard Shannon's words, and seemed intensely surprised when a few minutes afterward he touched her hand.

"Good-bye, Carroll!" he said, sorrowfully.

"I thought you had gone," she returned, wearily.

The unintentional cruelty of the remark cut him to the quick, but he understood how she was suffering to cause her to forget that, and the pain in his eyes deepened.

"I am going now," he said, gently. "It is your wish that I should go, is it not?"

"Yes—oh, yes!"

"And yet you know that I am eternally your friend. You know that there is nothing that could ever change that, do you not?"

"You are better than I deserve—a thousand times. It would be best for you if you could forget me."

"But I don't wish to do that. You surely will not deny that you need my friendship; therefore you will let me come to see you sometimes, will you not?"

"Your mother would not wish it."

"Then she would be a very cruel woman. I swear to you, dear, that if you will let me come sometimes, I will never speak to you of my love. I swear that I will remember only that you are my very dear sister. You would not desire to prevent that, would you, Carroll?"

How lonely and helpless and friendless she felt under the touch of his kindness. A great sympathy for herself and her own wretched fate seemed to fill her heart. Again tears rose to her eyes. She was pitying herself as if she were some other whose misery appealed to her.

"You are so good to me!" she cried, clasping his hand closely. "Why do you not despise and loathe me as all the world would do if it but knew? Ah, yes! Come to me! Help me to bear this frightful weariness—this sickening misery, and surely God will bless you. Only promise me that you will never mention the past! That is the one thing that I can not endure!"

"But some time, when you are stronger, you will tell me the whole story, will you not?"

"Perhaps; but not now. Some day, when I know that it is all ended—when I am sure that the wretchedness has done its deadly work, and that I am dying, then I shall send for you and tell you, that you may tell the story to her, my little Princess, and entreat her to forgive her most unhappy mother. You will do that?"

She was looking apealingly in his face, and Shannon controlled his grinding teeth sufficiently to answer, softly:

"You may trust me."

But in his heart he was saying:

"Long before that time shall have come, I shall have a avenged you, my poor, suffering darling. You think that you can hide the identity of that scoundrel from me, but my love for you and hatred for him will find him out."

She gratefully pressed the hand she held.

"And you will not tell Miss Kingman what I have said?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

"I shall tell no one anything that you may say."

"Thank you a thousand times! Oh, Mr. Shannon, how good it would have been if only God had given me a pure life, that I might have been your wife!"

His face flushed darkly. Great cords grew in his neck, and a flame of blood seemed to flash into his eyes. For a moment she was frightened at the fierceness of his expression, and as if he feared himself, he turned suddenly and almost flew through the door, pausing not to say a single word of farewell.

She stared after him for a moment in astonished silence, then flung herself upon the floor before the rickety chair, and burying her face upon her arms, burst into a flood of tears such as she had not known in many days.

Shannon, meanwhile, had rushed into the street. The cold air soothingly touched his hot brow, but did not calm the fever that raged within him. For the first time he suspected that if it had not been for that hideous shadow upon her life, Carroll would have been his wife, happy, in-

nocent, and beloved. It did not tend to lessen his rage against the man whom he now considered to have robbed him as well as destroyed the peace and purity of the woman he adored.

The interview had but tended to show him how impossible it was for him ever to forget his great love for the one woman in his life who had ever touched his heart, and his anger increased in proportion. His hand clinched savagely as he remembered that his rival had been in that little, meager room the night before, and a great rage filled his breast as he remembered that but for Miss Kingman he should have known who he was, and so not have been balked of his revenge.

"But he will go there again!" he told himself, savagely. "He will go there to see her, and I shall watch night and day that I may discover his identity. Then when I have done it, let him look out for himself! It will be his life or mine should he refuse to do her the justice that her innate purity demands."

Very few of his friends would have recognized Russell Shannon in the haggard man who walked so rapidly through the poor quarter of the city. His eyes were bloodshot, his white lips compressed. He felt in no condition to go to his home, but roamed about the city, striving to fix upon some plan by which he could be sure of capturing his man.

"She will never acknowledge the truth," he told himself. "She will deny to the bitter end that I am right when once he is nailed; but I must not give her the opportunity. I could not have been mistaken in the expression of her face as that wretch stood before her. She has no friends here, and yet he kissed her child—her child whose face even I, who love her so, did not see. I should know his cursed back again if I should see it across the earth. There is no danger but that I shall recognize him, and then—"

Until thoroughly exhausted in mind and body he walked, half conscious that he had neither eaten nor slept since the night previous; then he went home.

Miss Kingman was at the window when he mounted the stoop and opened the door with his latch-key. She met him in the hall. His expression frightened her.

"Where have you been, Russell?" she asked, hastily.

"I hardly know," he answered, dully. "Everywhere."

"You have seen Carroll?"

"Yes."

"Won't you come in here and tell me what she said?"

"There is nothing to tell that we did not both know before. She would say nothing."

"And have you seen—no one else?"

"No one," he answered, briefly.

"I called there to-day."

"Did you?"

"She was out, or sent me word that she was. She did not say anything about moving, did she?"

Shannon started.

"No," he answered. "Do you think she has done that?"

"I thought perhaps she might have, as she was evidently anxious to avoid us."

"Good heavens! I never thought of that. What a fool I have been! I shall never forgive myself if I have lost sight of her through any carelessness of mine."

"Don't think of it now, dear. You are tired and need rest. I can't tell you how you have changed since last night."

He smiled faintly.

"Not more than I have within the last few months. I am going to my room now. Make some excuse to my mother, Jerry, and don't let her miss me, will you?"

"I will try."

She put out her hand and touched his sympathetically.

He went up hurriedly to his room, but her question as to whether he thought it possible for Carroll to have moved prevented the rest of which he stood so greatly in need.

He threw himself upon the bed, but burning thoughts put an end to rest, and unable to endure it, he rose, changed his clothes, and once more went out into the street. It was about dusk, and people were coming home from their daily routine of business; but he saw nothing.

He had determined that he must go to that house where he had seen Carroll, to ascertain if she were still there, and bent upon that, he thought of nothing else.

He walked rapidly with bent head, but seemed instinctively to know when the street was reached. He turned into it and glanced up at the number.

As he did so he saw a man who had evidently but just passed from the house pause to light his cigar. The back was to him, and with a gasp almost of horror Russell Shannon recognized the man of the night previous who had been the guest in Carroll's room.

For a moment he stood as if petrified, then he strode hastily forward, every drop of blood in his body seeming on fire.

He caught the man by the shoulder and whirled him quickly around, then fell back with a low cry of rage and almost fear.

"Harry Winter!" he ejaculated. "Good God, no! It can not be!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE two men stood staring into each other's faces speechless, Russell Shannon in horrified consternation, Harry Winter in simple astonishment. The latter was the first to recover himself.

"What in Heaven's name is the matter with you, man?" he demanded, with an expression somewhat be-

tween amusement and anger. "Have you gone suddenly mad? Is that the latest fashion in greeting an acquaintance?"

The sound of the voice seemed to arouse Shannon from the apathy that had fallen upon him. A frown contracted his brow.

This, then, was the man whom he had seen in the room of Carroll Millbourne the night before; this was the man whose lips he had seen touch the mouth of her infant child; this was the man into whose face she was smiling as she had never smiled into his own, and this was the man whom he had believed to be the perfection of virtue in manhood—the Christian in whom he had believed and whom he trusted.

It never occurred to him that there could be any mistake on the subject. It never does to a convinced man, no matter how little reason there may be in his conviction.

And Harry Winter was his friend.

But he had forgotten that fact. He saw in him only the wretch who had destroyed the innocence and happiness of the woman whom he loved.

He bit his lip hard to control his fierce wrath, then in a voice of concentrated rage, he said:

"The street is scarcely the place for our conversation. I have that to say to you which can not be said here. Where shall we go?"

Winter bowed. He understood perfectly that some dreadful thing had occurred, but there was yet an element of fear to be implanted in his nature. His pride was in arms, and it was a nature filled to the brim with pride.

"My club is just around the corner," he said, slowly.

Shannon flushed. That was another point of evidence against him, if another had been needed.

"We can discuss the matter no better there than here," he said, coldly.

"Then perhaps my room will answer your purpose. If not, name a place yourself and I will meet you there."

"Your room will do. It is nearer than mine."

Winter bowed again. He turned without a word, and in silence the two walked in the direction of his room. When they had reached it Winter turned up the gas, then faced his one-time friend silently, but with inquiry written upon his face.

Shannon had had time in which to recover himself and make some plan of attack. He had concluded that to make an immediate stand might be injurious to the cause of the woman whom he desired to champion, and therefore the better plan might be to try to conciliate.

"Harry," he said, almost gently, "you and I have been friends for years. You were the husband of my sister who is dead. We have loved each other in the past as few brothers have loved. You have professed that your life and heart have been given up to religion, and I have believed you. You are one of the few men whom I would have trusted with more than my life. It is very hard to be disappointed in you."

Winter was more astonished than ever. Some fear was manifest for his friend's sanity, but it was expressed simply in his face and not by words.

"In what have I disappointed you?" he asked, quietly.

"In the greatest of all things."

"I never professed to be a saint."

A flush of anger darkened Shannon's countenance.

"No," he replied, "but you did profess to be a Christian, and even had you not, your very manhood, to take nothing else into consideration, should have kept you from the diabolical act that you have committed."

Winter's face paled.

"Of what is it that you accuse me?" he demanded, icily.

"It is utterly useless to pretend an ignorance that is a

disgrace to you. You have already done enough. For God's sake, be man enough to stand by it and face the future!"

"I honestly think that you have gone mad, Russell. Tell me in plain English what it is that you mean. I am neither afraid to face the knowledge nor the consequences of any act of mine. What have I done?"

"You know but too well. I refer to that poor, unhappy child whose rooms you left as I met you."

"You mean Mrs. Mills?"

Winter's countenance was a study.

"Yes."

"And why should I not call there if I wish?"

Shannon took a step forward, his hand clinched closely; then he reconsidered, and fell back almost fainting.

"Is it possible that you can ask me a question like that? Is it possible that you are so lost to all decency that you can face me in that bold, daring way, knowing that the whole, despicable, horrible truth is known to me?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The girl whom you call Mrs. Mills is the only woman whom I ever loved."

"You surprise me; and yet I fail to see what that has to do with me."

"Good God, man! have you neither heart nor conscience that you dare stand there and speak like that of the great wrong that you have done? Don't you know that to-day she might have been my honored wife but for the terrible curse that you have put upon her life?"

"I?"

The astonishment in the tone was indescribable.

"You!"

There was a long silence between them, then very quietly Winter asked:

"Who has told you this most remarkable story?"

"It is utterly useless for you to deny it. I know it from a source that can not be controverted."

"I have not the remotest intention of denying anything," answered Winter, haughtily. "You have come here accusing me of a crime, and attacking the reputation of an innocent woman. If I did not believe you to be stark, staring mad, I think I should horsewhip you."

Even then Shannon could not see that those were the words of a guiltless man. He saw in them only the cover that a scoundrel uses to hide his dastardly shame. He flushed dully, but again reflected that he might best serve Carroll by calmness.

"It is utterly useless to assume that tone with me," he said, not quite able to conceal the scorn and indignation he felt. "You see I know of what I am speaking."

"Do you mean to tell me that Mrs. Mills told you this?"

"Oh, no! She loves the man who has destroyed her peace too well for that. She would have concealed your crime if the power had not been denied her. She would have shielded you even at any cost to her nameless child, but it was impossible. In the name of Heaven, man, why have you done it? Surely she was young and beautiful enough to have satisfied any one. Why could not you have married her, in the first place? But you will not refuse to do it now, Harry. Of that I am sure!"

"Marry Mrs. Mills? I?"

"Yes."

"Most certainly not!"

"And why?"

"For the very simplest reason in the world. I don't love her!"

"But, Harry, think how you have wronged her. Think what her life must be if you fail to make of her an honest woman. Think—"

"Look here, Russell, I am tired of all this. If you

have not gone crazy, I don't know what is the matter with you. Once for all, stop it! You attack me in the street in a manner that would warrant any man knocking you down; then you come to my room and insult me with the most outrageous bit of slander that was ever invented against any man. My patience is exhausted. Because you are my brother-in-law I have tried to bear with your wild words, but I am tired of them. Now either leave my room or behave yourself like a gentleman."

Shannon's breath came hard and fast.

"You dare say that to me!" he cried, hoarsely—"you dare! I came to you to try to make you see your duty; I came to try to undo the great wrong that you have done in the only way that an honorable man can right a wrong like that, and an insult is the reward I receive. I see now that I must treat you as a gentleman must always treat a scoundrel. You shall marry the woman whom you have wronged—you shall give her child a name, or by Heaven you shall answer to me for it!"

"In what way?"

"With your dastardly life!"

Winter laughed.

"Duels are out of fashion in these days," he said, coldly, "and even if they were not, I should still refuse to fight you. There is no reason why I should. I tell you that my patience is exhausted. Now, leave my room, or I will have you locked in a madhouse."

"Scoundrel!"

The word came through the white lips simultaneously with a spring, and Shannon's long, strong fingers closed around Winter's throat.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THERE were roses upon the table in the sitting-room that Mrs. Millbourne occupied, roses upon the table and

white hyacinths in a pretty jar close by whose fragrance filled the atmosphere delightfully. The room was furnished in nowise different from what it had been upon that afternoon that Carroll had bidden it an eternal farewell, but there was something about it that gave it a degree of comfort, a home-like appearance that it had not possessed at that time.

Perhaps it was the flowers, but there were other things also that Ballard Hilliard had provided—ferns in the windows, a basket of fruit in the corner, and little touches of brightness in that line that only wealth can purchase, particularly at that season of the year.

Millicent Millbourne sat before a not overbrilliant fire, toasting her toes and enjoying a delicious pear from the plentiful supply. There was neither happiness nor content in her expression, neither resignation nor hope, but a certain hopelessness that was infinitely appealing.

She turned her head slightly as a knock sounded upon the door, but rose, and extended her hand with a faint smile as she saw who her visitor was.

"Mr. Hilliard," she exclaimed, with genuine pleasure, "this is kind. I have no friend who remembers me as you do. The basket of fruit came half an hour ago. Won't you help me to enjoy it?"

"Thank you," he replied, selecting a few grapes. "I was afraid I should find you out this evening, and as I had some particular business upon which I wished to see you, and more especially as I am going away to-morrow, I should have had to await your return."

"You are going away to-morrow?"

"To bring Miss Kingman home."

"Oh! I had forgotten her week is up. When is your marriage to be, Mr. Hilliard?"

His face flushed. He had never become quite accustomed to hearing the mother of Carroll speak to him so calmly of his marriage to another woman.

"I don't know," he answered, wearily. "Miss Kingman seems in no hurry, and I don't feel inclined to push her beyond her desire."

"And yet she loves you. Of that I am sure."

"Yes," stammered the young man.

"I shall be glad to see you married, because I think you will both be happier. You are devoting too much time to your work. You won't mind my speaking to you in this way, will you?—because I am old enough to be your mother, you know. And then you have given me your friendship of your own accord. It is very dear to me, Mr. Hilliard."

He took her hand and pressed it tenderly. A close observer might have seen that there were tears in his eyes.

"I like to have you speak to me as if you were my mother," he said, very softly. "My own mother died years ago, you know, and I feel very forlorn and lonely sometimes with no one to advise or counsel me. I wish you would speak to me sometimes as if I were really your son. I wish you would try to feel toward me as if I were."

Mrs. Millbourne was still smiling, but so tremulously that even Ballard knew that it was through a mist of tears.

"I think I do feel like that," she replied, her voice breaking over the simple words. "It was very good of God to send me a son when he took my daughter. I can scarcely understand yet the sympathy that has been established between us, Mr. Hilliard."

He had sat down. Wearily, miserably he rested his elbow upon his knee and concealed his face in his hand.

"Those are things which one never understands," he answered.

She looked at him curiously.

"But in our case it was most singular. I am old, you are young; I am poor, you are one of the favored of the gods; I am miserable, and you are happy—"

"Happy!"

He had articulated the word before he was aware of it, and in a way that would have told his pitiful story to the most careless.

She put out her hand as he would have risen, and placed it upon his shoulder.

"Mr. Hilliard — Ballard!" she exclaimed, earnestly, "you said but now that you wished me to speak to you as if you really were my son. Forget for the time, if you can, that you are not, and tell me what it is that is troubling you. I have seen for some time that you are not happy, but have been forced to hold my tongue and say nothing; but it is growing upon you instead of lessening. You have everything to make life blessed—wealth, fame, honor, the girl you love—"

She felt a shiver pass over him, and paused.

"Ballard," she whispered, when she could bear the silence no longer, "what is it that you would have me understand? It can't be possible that you do—not love—your—"

He rose suddenly, shaking off her hand as if its touch hurt him. He leaned over and kissed her cheek swiftly.

"There are some things of which even the dearest mother must not speak to her son," he said, hurriedly. "This is one of them. Forget that we have spoken upon the subject at all, dear Mrs. Millbourne. My betrothed wife is a thousand times—ten thousand times too good for me! If I but deserved the love that she has given me I might be a happier man; but I do not, and, God help me! I never shall."

"My poor boy!"

She had risen and was standing with one of her hands clasped in his, the other upon his shoulder.

"Hush!" he cried, a spasm of pain contracting his features. "I tell you I can't bear it! You don't under-

stand—you never will—but my conscience is driving me mad!"

"You do not love her, and yet you would marry her because she loves you. Is not that it, Ballard?"

He groaned.

"Don't!" he cried, pleadingly. "I tell you I can't bear it! Come, let me tell you," lifting his hair from his forehead, where great beads of perspiration stood. "I came upon business, I told you. Do you remember that I spoke to you of a friend of mine who is a publisher? He wants an article of Daudet's translated. Do you think you can do it?"

She tried to pull herself back to the business groove again, but her heart was very heavy. It required a moment of reflection before she could quite comprehend what he had said; then she answered, wearily:

"Oh, yes! I don't know. I have never done anything of that kind; but I can try. Does it require much skill?"

"Not any more than you possess. There is a great field open for you if you succeed with this. There will be no more drudgery, no more sewing until your eyes are out and your health is broken. You will be quite your own mistress, and in a line of life that will suit you intellectually as well as physically. It will not give you so much time to think of your own sorrows, because you will be immersed in those of others. I have recommended you very highly to my friends, and I hope you will try very hard for my sake. I am greatly interested."

"How good you are!"

"For the love of Heaven don't say that of me! It makes me feel like the greatest scoundrel under the sun."

"You are too sensitive. What friend have I ever had who was to me what you are? Are you not my son?"

His brow contracted. For a moment his teeth were buried deeply in his lip; then he hurriedly held out his hand.

"Good-bye!" he exclaimed, hoarsely.

"Good-bye. Shall I get this manuscript when you return?"

"My friend will send it up to-morrow. I wish you would promise that at my next call you will read me the first chapter."

"You may be sure that I shall lose no time. God bless you, my dear boy, and send you the happiness that you deserve!"

He did not give her an opportunity of saying more, but, lifting her hand to his lips, he pressed it there for a moment, then dropped it and went hurriedly from the room.

Poor Hilliard! It seemed to him that she was all that he had left in life, and his sorely tried heart clung to her as if she had indeed been his mother; yet his conscience was terribly aroused as he remembered that but for him her beloved daughter might have been beside her. He felt like a hypocrite, a scoundrel, and yet he knew that without him life would have been hideously hard for her to bear. She seemed to lean upon and cling to him, and he had been able to provide her with a number of little comforts that had made existence easier.

And how she appreciated his friendship!

"Dear boy!" she murmured as he left her. "What an awful contemplation it is that life is so at sixes and sevens with us all! I believed he loved Miss Kingman, yet I have seen for some time that he was not happy. He is too honorable to fail to keep his part of the compact. They have been engaged for years. Poor boy! how I wish I could help him in his sorrow as he has in mine! How I wish that I could be the comfort to him that he has been to me! There is no nobler man on all God's earth than Ballard Hilliard!"

His sorrow touched her heart as nothing had had power to do since that morning when he had brought home the supposed body of her dear child and, thinking of that, she

sat down at a little desk that the room contained—a little thing of no value that had been Carroll's—and leaned her head upon her hand. Her other hand was pulling carelessly at a tiny piece of wood that projected from the under part of one of the drawers.

She was not conscious of her movements, but was thinking deeply, when suddenly, to her astonishment, a little aperture or drawer, of whose existence she was unaware, opened. It rather startled her, arousing her as it did so suddenly from her meditations.

She looked at it closely, then drew it out.

Behind it she saw a letter that had evidently slipped over the back. She drew it out and held it in her hand for many minutes before opening it. The envelope was addressed to Ballard Hilliard in the handwriting of her daughter.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE atmosphere seemed to have grown dense and murky about Millicent Millbourne. She breathed with difficulty. She seemed to understand that another crisis in her singularly unhappy life had been reached.

She could not have defined her sensations nor put her fears into words, but it appeared to her that some message had been sent to her from the dead. A deathly pallor settled upon her features. Her head reeled, and with a sob she allowed her face to fall upon her arm that rested upon the little desk.

What was it that she feared?

She could not have told if her very soul depended upon it, yet there it was before her, this intangible something, spectral but defiant.

She raised her head and turned the letter over in her hand. The seal was unbroken.

Did Carroll think she had mailed the letter and leave it there through forgetfulness? She could not answer her

own query. She was aware that Carroll had known Ballard Hilliard, but not sufficiently well to write to him.

And then, did not the letter belong to him? And had she the right to read it?

At first it seemed to her that in honor she must send it to him unread, and there was something like relief in the thought. Then she remembered that perhaps Carroll had reconsidered and did not wish it sent.

What should she do?

Decidedly the course of honor was to throw the letter into the fire unread. She approached the little smoldering embers, and more than once made the effort to place the letter upon the fast-dying coals, but each time her hand was withdrawn.

Why should she not read what her daughter had written? she asked herself, proudly, as if resenting the insult that her own thought had offered. Did she suspect her own pure child of writing words to any man that she might not see?

A flush suffused her face at the thought. She compressed her lips firmly, and with steady fingers tore the end from the envelope. With great deliberation she unfolded the letter.

Again there was a moment of hesitation. She turned the lamp a trifle higher. Her eyes sought the sheet of paper once more.

"For the last time, my own Ballard!"

That was what she read, and then the letter fell.

She never knew how long she stood there staring into the dying embers. She never remembered afterward what her sensations were, but she was recalled to herself by a terrible numbness in her limbs. With a weariness that was like death, she sunk into a chair, then shuddered as she saw the letter lying at her feet. It seemed like a serpent that was stinging her with its very presence.

Then suddenly some thought seemed to return to her paralyzed brain.

"I am a fool!" she cried out, harshly. "Of what is it that I am accusing my dear dead one? I should strangle the person that dared suggest that all was not well with her, and yet here in my own mind I am insulting her memory. There is some secret she was too unhappy to tell even me, but I will find out now, and then I will understand that poor boy's misery perhaps."

She picked up the letter once more, and eagerly began its perusal.

"I know that I am doing wrong to write you, belonging as you do to another, but surely God will forgive me in that it is an eternal farewell that I shall say—an eternal farewell to you and the happiness that we both knew in the dear, dead past when we belonged to each other alone, or I thought we did. I am going away, dear—away on that long journey that we must all take sooner or later, and it seemed to me that it would be made easier by knowing that I had said a last word to you. I should go to see you, but I dare not trust myself. Oh, dearest heart, it is bitterly hard! Don't think that I blame you. I should perhaps have done the same thing myself, for I know that you loved me even as I loved you. That makes the thought of the sin of the last few months more bearable, for I know that God will forgive me when I remember His words of that other Magdalene: 'She sinned much in that she loved much.'"

"Good God!"

The words fell from the poor mother's lips with a white-heat horror that was indescribable. A blindness had seized upon her. The letter was clutched closely in her long, stony fingers. She was staring at it dumbly, with wild, sightless eyes. Her form was rigid, her face like marble.

She seemed to take no note of time. A bell in a neigh-

boring steeple struck the hour twice, but she had not heard. If a single thought had come to lift the awful horror that had settled upon her brain, her countenance gave no indication of it. The letter was still before her. A loud knock upon her door aroused her.

Mechanically she rose, feeling stiff and sore, and walking heavily across the floor, opened the door.

A messenger stood there with a letter and a package. She took both, signed her name to the tiny paper he carried, then closed the door. Unconsciously she opened the note and read:

"MY DEAR MRS. MILLBOURNE,—I found the package from my friend Delevan upon my return home. As I leave by a very early train to-morrow, I concluded that I would send it to-night. Let everything else go, and do your best upon this, as a future of fame and wealth depends upon your success.

"God bless you! With fond affection, believe me,

"Yours most sincerely,

"BALLARD HILLIARD."

She crushed the inoffensive paper in her hand, her teeth meeting each other in a crunching way, such as one has heard from an angry animal. Her eyes gave forth a sort of green flame.

She flung the thing from her into the embers that were dead now, her lips straight and stiff, but words issuing from them.

"Curses upon you!" she cried, hoarsely. "Curses upon you and yours forever and forever! You have robbed me of my daughter, and yet you dare to come here to me with your words of sympathy and condolence. You meet her heart-broken mother with a lie upon your false lips—you who are her daughter's murderer. You think to ease your cursed conscience by offering her desolate mother a means of earning a livelihood. You think to

deceive that other pure girl who trusts you, but I swear that you shall not! Oh, God! why in this land that prides itself upon its justice is there not some punishment for a wretch like that?"

She paused for a moment with uplifted hand, then memory returned to her of that last conversation she had had with Carroll in that room. It all came back word for word as it had been spoken, and a hideous agony filled her countenance. Great tears poured over the white face, and she fell upon her knees, lifting her folded, trembling hands as if in supplication.

"My darling, my darling!" she whispered, hoarsely, "could you not understand your mother's heart? I told you that death was preferable to disgrace, but I did not mean it, dear. It might have been so in other cases, but not for you, my love—not for you! Oh, Carroll, come back to me! Come back, my darling! I will be so tender, so true! Never a word of reproach shall pass my lips. Oh, God, have pity upon me! Let me suffer anything—anything, only give me back my child! It is too late! Too late! And I drove her from me! I see it all now, so clearly, so cruelly clear. Carroll, can you hear me up there in heaven? Can you see how your poor mother suffers? Do you understand that she did not mean what she said to you, and that she would give her life—yes, her very soul—if she could but bring you back? Oh, my darling, my darling!"

She fell forward upon her face, sobbing—sobbing in a way that no words can describe.

She lay there until the gray of the morning stole through the windows, weeping and moaning, calling upon her loved one for forgiveness, begging of God that she might come to her desolate mother if for a moment, but to speak one word of love and consolation. Then as the morning came and reality told her that what she asked was impossible, she rose and looked about her.

Carroll's letter was still in her hand, the French novel lay upon the floor unwrapped, and Ballard Hilliard's note was upon the gray ashes where she had thrown it. A smile that was almost cruel came over her features. Her eyes were upon it, and to it she seemed to speak.

"I shall make you suffer," she said, huskily, "even as you have made her and me suffer. You think you can escape the vengeance of a mother? We shall see! I know where to strike you hardest, and as there is a God, I will do it!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

GERALDINE KINGMAN was standing before the window in the drawing-room of the Shannon residence, beating a tattoo upon the glass with the tips of her slender fingers, but the slight noise had not the power to recall her wandering thoughts.

She was thinking of Carroll and of Ballard Hilliard, thanking God half consciously that the man whom she so loved was innocent of any wrong; thinking of how eternally what she had discovered had separated those two.

"Her own act has made marriage between them impossible," she said aloud, but still speaking to herself, "and the kindest thing that I can do is to keep her existence a secret. It would but bring disgrace upon her mother and unhappiness to Ballard, and do Carroll no good. I hope I am not selfish in my decision. Heaven knows I want to act for the best, and I pray to God that I am not influenced by my own desires!"

Then she was silent for a time, and stood there with knit brows, going all over the subject again, and seeing less reason than ever why she should make it known that Carroll had not been killed in the railroad disaster, and as she thought, she heard the bang of the great front door.

She turned her head and looked down the stoop.

It was Russell Shannon who was going out.

She could not exactly understand it, but there was something in his very carriage that made her realize that all was not well. She scarcely knew what it was that she feared; certainly she could have given no reason why she should dog the footsteps of that man whom she knew to be able to take care of himself; but something, the conversation of the night before, perhaps, made her uneasy.

Her heart gave a great bound, then seemed to stand still.

She stood for a moment irresolute, then, without pausing to consider her act, she ran upstairs, secured her hat and wrap, and though it was growing dark, she hurried out into the street alone, not even leaving a message for her hostess.

It was growing dark, yet so quick had her movements been that when she reached the street she distinctly saw the form of the man whom she wished to pursue not far in advance of her. She did not quicken her steps to overtake him, but keeping him well in sight, that she might not lose him by any sudden turn, she followed after.

She readily recognized the fact that he was bending his steps toward the house that they had visited together the night previous, and she determined that if he called upon Carroll they would have their interview together, for she keenly felt the responsibility that she had unintentionally assumed.

Still she did not join him, but kept up her position in the rear.

She was a very few feet behind when he turned the corner nearest to the little rickety building, her veil drawn across her face. She saw Harry Winter as he emerged from the door-way before Shannon had time to lift his eyes, and a low cry escaped her. She, too, had recognized the fact that he was the same man whom they had seen in Carroll's room, and the same conclusion was arrived at that had so disturbed Shannon.

Her eyes turned upon Shannon. She understood his feelings. She saw him spring forward. She heard the exclamation of rage. She saw him whirl Winter about as if he had been but a ball, and then she heard the cry that issued from his white lips as Shannon recognized his friend and brother-in-law.

She heard the conversation that followed and understood its import, yet she felt then that she dared not make her presence known, though Winter was an old friend of hers. She shrunk back, an awful fear tugging at her heart, for she had read aright the expression of Shannon's face, and she knew that some terrible scene was about to follow.

Her resolution was quickly taken. She would know where they went and be ready to take action in the event of its reaching the point she feared.

She flitted along behind them in the gathering gloom, sometimes almost unable to keep up with their long, swinging strides without running, but never losing them for a moment. She saw them enter the house where Winter lived. The door closed upon them.

She paused for a second to consider, then boldly mounted the steps.

"Is this a boarding-house?" she asked of the servant who answered her ring at the bell.

"No, madame. We let rooms."

"May I see the person who keeps the house?"

"Yes, madame. Walk in, please."

She entered the drawing-room and sat down. It seemed to her an age before the lady of the house made her appearance. She was growing too nervous to have borne it longer, when the door opened and a pleasant-faced woman entered. Miss Kingman heaved a sigh of relief.

She rose and went straight up to her, knowing that it was best to state her errand boldly.

"Madame," she said, endeavoring to speak quietly, but not succeeding very well, "I have come upon an

errand that may seem singular to you, and yet I implore you to grant a request that I shall make."

The woman looked interested.

"Won't you be seated?" she asked, politely.

Miss Kingman shook her head, glancing nervously in the direction of the door.

"No," she answered. "There is not time. You have a gentleman boarding with you—Doctor Harry Winter?"

"Yes."

"He came in but a moment ago with another gentleman. They have gone to Doctor Winter's room. Madame, I know you will think it a most extraordinary request, but I want to ask your permission to hear the conversation that passes between those two."

The woman drew back.

"Are you a detective?" she asked.

"No. It is my desire to avoid publicity instead of seeking it. I have reason to believe that there will be trouble between those two, and if it really comes to that I wish to prevent it. I should prefer their not knowing the action that I have taken, in the event of their being no trouble between them, but I greatly fear that there will be some dreadful result from this interview if you refuse."

"I do confess that what you ask is most extraordinary. Doctor Winter has been in my house for some time, and I have found him—"

"A gentleman always; but the greatest gentleman upon earth will get into trouble sometimes. I am seriously afraid that you will regret it if you refuse. Come with me, if you will; then if you think that I have heard that to which I should not have listened, take me before those two when their conversation is ended. But, first, you must agree that anything you hear is to remain a secret."

"It is foolish to ask that, because you don't know whether I should keep my word or not, even under any promise. My honor is sufficient without my word,

though I confess that it seems sadly compromised in yielding to your request."

"But you will not refuse?"

"I will not. You are a lady. We will trust each other for once."

She led the way, and the two entered a room adjoining that occupied by Dr. Winter and communicating by a door. Every word was distinctly audible.

The landlady was convinced that she had not done wrong in granting the request of her strange visitor when she heard the words addressed by Dr. Winter to his guest:

"Now either leave my room, or behave yourself like a gentleman."

We know what followed.

Shannon's voice was lifted in anger. The woman drew back, convulsively clutching the arm of her guest.

"What are we to do?" she gasped. "They will fight, sure!"

Geraldine Kingman was white to the lips. Something in Dr. Winter's manner had made her doubt his guilt, though she scarcely confessed it even to herself. The words of the lady beside her seemed a positive relief.

"We must prevent that," she said, hurriedly. "It was fear of that which brought me here. Is there any way through which we can get into that room?"

"None, if they have locked the door leading to the hall. This one is fastened by a very heavy bolt on the other side."

Miss Kingman leaned forward and applied her ear to the key-hole. She shrunk back with a cry of alarm.

"My God!" she exclaimed, "there is not a moment to be lost. Come!"

She dashed into the hall, followed closely by the woman of the house, and flung open the door leading to Harry Winter's room.

Shannon's fingers were clasping Winter's throat.

"For the love of Heaven, stop!" she cried, wildly. "Have you both gone mad?"

She was between them almost before they realized what had happened, and the two men had fallen apart.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THERE was an expression half of anger, half of shame upon the face of Russell Shannon as he realized what had happened; but Harry Winter's eyes blazed with wrath. His teeth were set deeply into his lips to prevent the flow of indignant words that he felt rising to them.

Miss Kingman glanced from one to the other, then her womanhood overcame her, and she would have fainted but that Winter caught her in time and placed her upon a chair. The lady who kept the house went forward and placed her arm about the shrinking girl. White and giddy, Geraldine Kingman sat there, but she was effectually recalled by hearing Russell Shannon's remark, made in an under-tone, to Dr. Winter:

"We shall meet again whenever you like; only let it be soon. I tell you that this is a matter that can not—shall not rest."

Winter's face crimsoned. He glanced hastily in the direction of Miss Kingman, recognizing readily enough that she had heard, and, worse still, that she understood the meaning and cause of the remark.

He bowed coldly to his brother-in-law.

Miss Kingman was upon her feet almost immediately, her white face looking spectral against her burning eyes.

"What is it that you would do?" she cried, her hands clasped tightly together, her voice thick and hoarse. "Do you wish to make the shame of that poor girl public? Is it your desire to brand her before all the world? She is dead to those who are nearest to her—whom her sorrow would most disgrace; then, for the love of God, let her re-

main so! Do you think that your fighting can erase the terrible wrong that has been done her? For shame, Russell! Are you a man or a child that you allow your feelings to so overrule your reason?"

Shannon flushed, but Winter had grown pale as deatn. He was watching Miss Kingman with an expression of countenance that was like that of a wounded animal, speechlessly pleading.

"I do not intend to harm her!" Shannon exclaimed, doggedly; "but I swear that justice shall be done her!"

"And do you think that fighting can force any but a physical coward?" asked Miss Kingman, heavily. "If you can not persuade by words—if you can not convince the heart through the reason—if you can not make one see the wrong he has done and repair it by kindness, do you think that you can do it by force?"

"Yes."

"Then I tell you that you can not! I am the impartial friend of the girl whom we would both avenge if we could, and therefore I can see more clearly than you can. You are doing her more harm than good. You will regret your act. You will receive no thanks from her. Come with me, at least, until you have had time to think this over."

She held out her hand. For a moment Shannon hesitated. He did not like the idea of being treated as if he were a boy who had been detected in some foolish quarrel and chidden for his temper. But there was nothing that he could do. He could not fight in the presence of ladies, and he did not wish to say anything further upon the subject to Winter in their presence.

He turned quietly and picked up his hat from the table where he had laid it, glancing but once in the direction of Winter.

"To-morrow," he said, briefly.

Then he offered his arm to Miss Kingman.

They were about to leave the room together. Winter's face was a study. He seemed to be struggling against some tremendous emotion—some overpowering desire that finally mastered him. Before they had reached the door he sprung forward and caught Miss Kingman's arm.

"One minute!" he cried, hoarsely. "I scorn to explain anything to this man who has accused me of so vile—so loathsome an act, and more especially having known me and been my friend, as I believed, for years; but to you it is different. I can not let you go believing me capable of an act so despicable."

Miss Kingman turned, her hand grasping Shannon's arm convulsively. Her color came and went with surprising rapidity. She leaned faintly against the door-casing, her eyes fixed upon Winter's set face.

"Go on," she said, dully.

"I don't know what startling evidence you two can have against me to accuse me of a dastardly crime like this, but before Heaven I am innocent! I swear to you upon the honor of a gentleman that I never even knew until this man told me that the lady in question was not a widow!"

Miss Kingman glanced from him to Shannon in a nervous, questioning way that showed but too clearly that her convictions were much shaken.

Shannon smiled satirically.

"Are you so easily convinced?" he asked, coldly.

"I tell you again!" exclaimed Winter, earnestly, "that to the day of my death I should never either have acknowledged or denied this thing to Shannon, neither should I have taken any pains to convince him in any way, but I can not allow myself to be stamped as a scoundrel in the eyes of the woman for whom I entertain the greatest respect, without at least an effort to clear myself of the false charge."

"Then you are not guilty?" said Miss Kingman, speaking her thoughts aloud without intention.

"I am not. If you have any doubt upon the subject, come with me to the lady. I can prove to you by her and by others that I never saw her in my life until I met her in the hospital where her child was born. Her peculiarly friendless condition appealed to me, and I promised to do for her what I could. For that purpose—simply to see if I could not make life a trifle less hard for a woman whom I pitied—I called upon her twice in her new quarters. I was there last night, and again to-night. If I have committed a criminal act in an endeavor to lighten a burden that seemed to me too heavy to be borne by shoulders so frail, then I am guilty; but in nothing else am I."

"Is this true?"

"I do not ask you to take my word. I can prove all that I have said."

He was standing with his arms folded upon his breast. His face was magnificent in its pallid hauteur. Miss Kingman put out her hand to him impulsively. He flushed deeply as he took it.

"I believe you without proof," she said, with emotion. "I need no other voice than yours to tell me that you are innocent. I know it."

He looked the gratitude that for a moment his lips refused to utter.

"Can you forgive me?" she asked, simply.

"There is nothing to forgive. You are not to blame," he answered, slowly. "I can not sufficiently express my regret that such an outrageous scene has occurred in your presence, but I thank you for your confidence. I can bear anything else better than want of that."

He had not meant to say so much, but the undercurrent of the words was not noticed by her. She turned to Russell Shannon, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Can not you also see that he is speaking the truth?" she asked, tremulously. "Can you not see that you shall have to look further for the guilty man in this case?

Don't you know when you look in Harry Winter's face that he is incapable of the act that we have ascribed to him?"

Shannon did not speak. His eyes were fixed searchingly upon Winter's countenance, but the latter was not looking at him. Miss Kingman was the only object of interest in that room to him. There was gratitude in the expression, but no approach to guilt.

"Oh, Russell, are you not great of soul enough to acknowledge your error when you have made one?" asked Miss Kingman, reproachfully, not understanding his silence.

"Yes," he answered, quietly, in a manly, straightforward way that was infinitely becoming to him. "I am ready to acknowledge that I have been a fool, blinded by my own stupefying pain. I took for granted a thing that might have ruined the life of my friend, or—made of me a murderer. I have made a great ass of myself, Harry. I have accused you of a thing for which I should not excuse a man were I in your place, and yet I ask you to forgive me."

For a moment Winter hesitated; then he put out his hand and grasped that of his dead wife's brother.

"Let us forget it," he said, huskily.

"Not quite that," returned Shannon, dully. "I can not forget, because the guilty wretch exists! If he were dead, I might try, but as long as he lives, the determination shall live in me to find him and cause him to repair the horrible wrong he has done, let the circumstances be what they may. I shall not make another mistake such as this, but when I have found him he shall understand the debt that he has got to pay."

There was an expression in the eyes that made Miss Kingman shudder. There was no defined thought in her mind, but somehow she dreaded the time when Russell Shannon should discover the man whom he sought. She

would have scorned herself could she have realized that there was a doubt in her mind of Ballard Hilliard, but it was there, gaunt and shadowy, but still a doubt.

Her lips were white and stiff as she turned to leave the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ONCE again Russell Shannon and Miss Kingman were detained by Harry Winter.

"While I thank you for the confidence that you have shown in me," he said, with dignity, "it is not my desire that there should be the remotest doubt at any future time in my entire innocence of this charge, and therefore I ask it as a favor that you go with me to call upon this lady. One can never tell what may occur in the future, and I do not wish that there ever should come a time when the matter would not be quite at rest."

There was, of course, at first a demur from both persons, but Dr. Winter insisted so strongly upon his point that they finally yielded, and together they went to call upon Carroll.

The visit was not fraught with any degree of pleasure to any one of the four, but was painful in the extreme. Carroll's feelings were spared all that was possible for justice to be done an innocent person.

Perhaps there was no one of the number more thoroughly miserable as they left the wretched room than was Miss Kingman. She had carefully avoided Ballard Hilliard's name, even in the private conversation that she had had with Carroll, and that of itself was an indication of the suspicion that she would never have acknowledged to even her own heart.

It was still quite early when the trio left Carroll, and at their invitation Dr. Winter accompanied them home. But once there, Miss Kingman would have excused herself

and have gone to her room, had not Shannon forestalled her by a request that he be excused for half an hour, and also that they found that Mrs. Shannon had retired to her room with a most severe headache.

It was without a feeling of embarrassment that Geraldine Kingman was left alone with Harry Winter. She was thinking too much of Carroll—wondering, with a vague shiver of apprehension, who had caused the terrible sorrow in that young life—scarcely daring to think, yet longing to be alone, when she realized that he was speaking to her.

"Have you known Mrs. Mills—or Miss Millbourne—long?" he asked.

"All her life, I think," she answered.

"Then surely you are able to judge something of whom she has loved."

"No!" she exclaimed, hastily, endeavoring to suppress the shudder that she feared he might observe. "I do not know whom she has loved; I do not even suspect. There was—one who—loved her—who would have made her his wife; but she was not willing."

"Poor fellow!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the greatest curse that can befall a man is to love without being loved in return."

"Or a woman either."

Miss Kingman's head was lowered. She did not speak as one does who simply acquiesces in a statement, or even as one who sympathizes in an assertion. Her voice was almost inaudible, and filled with a suffering that would not be denied expression.

Harry Winter started. His face flushed. He rose and stood leaning his elbow upon the mantel-piece, looking down upon her. The room was lighted only with the red fire-glow that was shining on them both. He looked at

her for some moments in silence, wondering if he had understood her aright. When he spoke his voice trembled.

"It is not possible that you could know that from experience," he said, softly. "You could not love without reciprocation."

Something in the tone, something in the scene, seemed to arouse all the womanly weakness in Geraldine Kingman's nature. A slow tear trickled through her eyelids, and as she felt it upon her cheek it seemed to break down every barrier. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed in a heart-broken way that seemed to unman her listener. He bore it for some moments in silence; then, unable to endure it longer, he knelt beside her and took the trembling form in his arms.

"What is it, Jerry?" he whispered. "Don't cry like that, my darling; you break my heart. For more than a year I have nourished and cherished the hope that one day I might win you for my wife. The death of that hope is almost like death of the soul to me. Jerry, do you know what it is that you are forcing me to believe? It is that you have loved not wisely—"

"But too well!" she interrupted, striving to control her voice. "Forgive me. I should not have submitted you to this scene. But there are times when I am so weak—so weak!"

"And the man whom you love—"

"Don't ask me that, Harry. And yet it is but right that I should tell you. I am his promised wife!"

"You?"

"Yes. Did you not know? Had you not heard of my engagement of years' standing to Ballard Hilliard?"

"I never knew."

"I thought every one did."

"But—I don't quite understand. You do not love him—"

"It is not that, God help me! It is that he does not love me."

"Jerry!"

"You see how weak I am in that I can tell you this. There is no one in all this world to whom I have spoken on this subject but you. I did not intend it."

"But who is so able to sympathize with you as I am?—I who have suffered in like manner?—I who am suffering now as never man did before?"

"And all because of me?"

"All because I love you!"

"Oh, how sorry I am! I never suspected! I—"

"Hush! Don't think that it is necessary to speak to me like that. How were you to suspect when I have kept it so carefully concealed, lest I should betray it at a time that was inopportune, and so lose my chance. Ah, Jerry, dearest heart, I know what your misery is! But tell me, dear, what shall you do?"

"How do you mean?"

"Shall you marry him?"

"Yes."

There was something dogged in the manner in which she pronounced the word. Winter drew back, an expression of horror in his eyes.

"You would not do that, Jerry!" he exclaimed, earnestly. "Think, dear, what you are saying. He does not love you. Are you sure of that?"

"I have tried to convince myself to the contrary, but I can not. I don't know why I tell you this. God knows it is humiliating enough!"

"You tell me because you know that I would give my life to aid you. You tell me because you feel in your heart that I would gladly give every joy in life if I could but bring you the love that ought to be yours. But may it not be possible that you wrong him?"

Geraldine Kingman shivered.

"No!" she groaned. "I could not mistake what he has told me with his own lips."

"And yet you would marry him? Oh, Jerry!"

"It is because I believe that I can be of service to him. It is because I believe that one day he will love me as I love him. It is because—"

"Do you really believe all that, child, or are you striving to delude yourself?"

She hesitated a moment, then began to sob afresh.

"Jerry," he said, tenderly, "be true to yourself, my darling. I am not pleading for myself now. You can't understand what life will be to you if you go into this marriage in which the love is all upon your side. It would be so much, so infinitely better, if it were but reversed, and the love were upon his side. There is that in a woman's nature that will always keep her in the line of truth and virtue if she be truly a woman in its better sense, but every man must love to be what his wife deserves. That is why marriage is so often a failure. The love is so seldom of the right kind on the part of the man, and when it is not, or when there is none at all, God help them both!"

"But I may win his love."

"I know it is the popular idea with fictional characters, but I tell you that it is not true. You never yet saw the case in which the wife won what the sweetheart could not."

"I will not believe it!" she cried, passionately. "God would not be so cruel! It is not true! Would you not marry me, if you really love me as you say, and risk the coming of love?"

He hesitated for a long time. Harry Winter was an honest and conscientious man, and he wanted to be sure that he was uttering the truth. He turned to the fire and buried his face in his hands for many minutes. When he lifted it it was gray with passion.

"God help me!" he exclaimed, hoarsely; "I am afraid that I would!"

Geraldine Kingman leaped to her feet.

"You would?" she cried, wildly, "and so shall I! I will marry Ballard Hilliard! I swear it! If I can not win his love afterward, then I can do that which we must all do sooner or later—I can die! But I will be his wife! There is nothing that shall prevent that! Nothing!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE night that followed was one of unusual horror to Geraldine Kingman. She went to bed after Harry Winter had left her, and tried to sleep; but that vague, shadowy unrest that had attacked her when she stood listening at the door of the room that contained Dr. Winter and Russell Shannon would not be stilled. She tried many times to shake it off, but it would not leave her.

She rose, and in her bare feet walked hurriedly up and down the room, thinking to force sleep through physical exhaustion, but without result. A nervousness that was almost like hysteria had attacked her; but still she had never acknowledged, even to her own heart, what it was she feared—what it was she thought.

"What is the matter with me?" she asked of herself many times, endeavoring to choke off the premonition that seemed about to drive her mad. "What is this unreal thing with which I am torturing myself? It is absurd, ridiculous! I will go to bed and to sleep."

But, in spite of resolution and effort, there was no sleep for her, and it was with a feeling of positive rejoicing that she saw the morning break.

"The day! Thank God!" she muttered, pushing back the disarranged hair from her haggard brow. "Another night like that would kill me. And all for what?"

She sat for a moment in deep reflection, staring into the gray, deserted street, then suddenly started up.

"I must go home to-day!" she cried, her teeth chatter-

ing together curiously. "My week is up, and Ballard said that if I did not come home he would come after me. I must not allow him the opportunity to come after me; I must keep him out of this town, because I have promised Carroll that he shall not know. Great heavens! how am I ever to keep that promise? Already that helpless baby has spoiled my whole life! Am I to go through existence with that secret that has already grown to be a nightmare upon my mind? Must I always preserve it, when it has already grown odious to me? Oh, God! why have I been forced to share this secret? Why could it not have been kept from me as well?"

She bowed her head upon the sill of the window for a time, and moaned, then she arose angrily and stood there looking out into the threatening sky.

"After all, what have I to do with Carroll Millbourne and her child?" she cried, coldly. "I am making an egregious fool of myself! She is nothing to me—never has been, save the object of my charity. Why should she come between me and my life's happiness? There is no reason, and she shall not! I will put this thing out of my life. I will forget that she does not lie up there in Woodlawn, near the lake, where we have all visited her, and I will be happy in my own way."

Her teeth were set firmly. There was an expression in her eyes that did not indicate any great degree of enjoyment; but, with nerves that had grown almost firm under the tensity of her resolution, she began to pack her trunk.

She forgot the hours, in her occupation, and was astonished when a knock sounded upon her door. She threw it open.

"What is the hour, Lizette?" she asked of the maid.

"Scarcely nine, ma'am," she replied.

"So late? I had no idea of that."

"Mr. Hilliard is here, ma'am."

"Mr. Hilliard?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Miss Kingman had grown pale. For a moment the old horror returned to her, then a flush glowed in her cheeks.

"Tell him that I will be down at once!" she exclaimed.

She closed the door and went swiftly to the glass. A crimson spot burned in either cheek. She was tremendously excited.

"He does love me!" she cried, as if striving to convince herself of something she knew to be untrue. "He does love me! He would not have come so early else. I will never believe anything else again! I must take him back at once, in order to prevent his finding out about her. I do it only for his good. Nothing else—nothing else! It would but make him miserable, and surely we have both had enough of that."

Very rapidly she had rearranged her toilet, taking unusual pains with her hair, then descended to the drawing-room, where her betrothed husband waited.

He bent and kissed her.

What was it in the act that sent a shiver through all her being? She could not have answered definitely, yet a thought was struggling for recognition in her brain. Was that the kiss of a lover? Was that the embrace of a betrothed husband? Was there the warmth of longing in his caress? Or was it not something that savored very strongly of remorse, this manner of his?

He had held her very closely to him for a moment, but it was in such a position that she could not see his face. He had kissed her, but the caress contained none of the enthusiasm of a lover. Her very soul sickened under it, and yet, unconsciously, she resolved sternly that she would not see.

She laughed a trifle hysterically, took his face between her hands, and kissed it of her own accord.

"I am so glad you have come," she cried, striving to speak lightly. "I have my things all packed, and we

shall start for home at once. It will seem so good to be back again!"

"Then you have not enjoyed it?"

"Oh, yes! It would be ungrateful to say that I have not, would it not? But I shall be glad to be at home again for all that. I have missed you so, Ballard."

"Have you, dear? I am glad to hear that. I need not tell you how lonely I have been."

"Have you really?" she asked, the laughter dying from her face, and a serious wistfulness taking its place.

"Really? Why, to be sure, little woman. Did you think that I should not? My life contains very little else than you, you know. I have wandered about like a sheep that had strayed away from the fold since you have been away. Oh, yes, Jerry, you may be quite sure that I was lonely enough to please even the most exacting woman!"

A brilliant light was dancing in her eyes, a spot of crimson had come to either cheek. She lifted herself and kissed him upon the chin.

"I shall never leave you again, Ballard," she said, with infinite tenderness, and some catch in the voice that suggested the nearness of tears.

"That is good. But when am I to have you for my own, Jerry?" he asked, gently, but still painfully unenthusiastic. "You know that you promised that you would answer me at the end of the week."

A defiant expression that he could not quite comprehend came into her eyes. She lifted her head, her lips firmly set, her breath peculiarly repressed.

"I am ready to become your wife, Ballard, at any time —at any time that you may desire it."

He hesitated a moment. A pallor that was almost piteous came about his mouth. He put up his hand to conceal the trembling of his lips. His face had suddenly grown haggard and gray.

"Thank you, dear," he said, slowly. "Then we will arrange it immediately upon our return to New York."

He sat down in a chair, without an invitation, or waiting for her to be seated. The room had grown strangely dark to him. He weakly lifted the hair from his brow. He seemed to feel as the condemned wretch does who has listened to the reading of his death-warrant.

And did Miss Kingman see it all? She would not! She closed her eyes for a moment to overcome her giddiness, then she, too, sat down.

There was a long silence between them—a most peculiar silence under the circumstances — then Hilliard put out his cold hand and gently stroked her wrist.

"When shall we be ready to go?" he asked, trying to infuse his voice with some degree of interest.

"To-day—this morning!" she answered, barely able to control the rising hysteria in the tone. "I should have gone anyway if you had not come."

"Are you not cutting your visit a day or two short?"

"Yes—no! No matter. I am tired. I want to be at home. There is no place like one's home, after all. Oh, Ballard, I wish to God I had not come! I wish to God you had insisted upon my remaining that morning in the studio when I told you that I was going!"

She had lost her self-control for the moment, and a long sob struggled through her lips. Hilliard had never heard anything like that from her before. He was startled into a forgetfulness of his own misery. He took her hand and leaned toward her.

"Why, Jerry!" he exclaimed. "What is the matter with you, dear? Why is it that you wish you had not come? Has anything happened, little one?"

"No!" she answered, shivering and pushing back the heavy hair from her forehead. "You must not mind me. I am nervous this morning, that is all. I—I did not sleep well last night, and my head aches."

"Then perhaps we had better wait over, and go to-morrow."

"No! no! no! There is nothing that could induce me to stay in this town another day—another hour. I feel as if I should suffocate here. I must go—I must or die, I tell you! Oh, Ballard, Ballard, take me home!"

And, more astonished than he had almost ever been before in his life, Hilliard consented.

CHAPTER XXX.

It was not a difficult thing for Miss Kingman to make excuses to her hostess for the suddenness of her departure, for, while Mrs. Shannon admired and loved her guest, she was never one to insist upon prolonging a visit after an intention had been declared to bring it to a close. Therefore, after a promise had been exacted that it would be repeated soon, and a playful reproof given to Hilliard for robbing her, she allowed Geraldine to go.

The latter saw Shannon for a moment alone before entering the carriage to be driven to the station.

"For goodness' sake, be careful what you do!" she said to him, earnestly. "Think what might have happened between you and Harry Winter if it had not been for my interference. Remember how unjust your accusation was, and have a care for the future. Will you promise me that you will?"

Shannon's eyes were fixed upon the floor. His haggard face appealed very strongly to her.

"Yes," he answered, wearily; "I shall try; but it seems to me that there is very little left in life. If I could but find that wretch I think I should kill him, and then I should take her away and make her forget."

Miss Kingman shuddered, the old pallor that her departure had erased returning.

"Don't speak like that. Do you think there would

ever be any happiness for either of you after you had done a thing like that? One crime does not wipe out another."

"Perhaps not. It is so absolutely dreary and desolate, this thing of living, that, after all, I might but be doing him a favor. I don't think you understand how it is with me, Jerry. If Carroll had died, I could have borne it with the fortitude that a man should show; but I think this thing has robbed me of all my courage. I am not like myself. I could have given her to another man whom she loved, with all my heart; but to see her like this, to know that she is the accursed of her sex, through a scoundrel whose identity I can not discover, maddens me!"

Miss Kingman's lips were twitching nervously. She strove to steady her voice as she replied:

"Remember that you can do her no good by hasty and unconsidered actions, and you may do something that you will have cause to regret all your life. If anything happens, you will let me know, will you not?"

"Yes."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye, and God bless you! I suppose we shall receive cards to your wedding shortly?"

A spasm of pain contracted the handsome face.

"Yes," she answered, endeavoring to speak lightly.

"You ought to be a very happy woman."

She did not lift her eyes.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because Ballard Hilliard is a noble man. He is an ornament to his sex, and it should be the pride of your heart that you have won the love of such a man."

Miss Kingman did not reply. She stood there in her traveling-dress picking at the button upon her glove, her eyes downcast, an expression that might also be translated into shame upon her countenance. There was a curious silence between them; then, unable to bear it, she put out

her hand and clasped his closely. Suddenly there seemed a new bond of sympathy established between them. She could not exactly comprehend it.

"Good-bye," she whispered.

He pressed his lips upon her forehead.

"Hilliard would not grudge me that!" he exclaimed, with a wan smile. "It is the kiss of a brother, you know, Jerry."

"Yes, I know. You will write?"

"Yes."

There was another pressure of the hand, warm and close, then she went back to Mrs. Shannon and Hilliard.

"I was just about to come for you," the latter said. "We have no more than time to catch the train. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

The homeward journey was fitfully silent and gay, marked at one moment by laughter and at the next by sighs. That something unusual had happened to his fiancée, Ballard Hilliard felt assured, but he did not consider it wise to question her upon the subject until she had shown an inclination to take him into her confidence. He therefore humored her moods in every way.

He remained to luncheon with her at her request, but when he saw that she was wearied, half exhausted later, he left her.

"Take an hour's rest, Jerry," he said, as he touched his lips to hers at parting. "I will come to dine with you this evening, if I may, and then we can arrange our future when you are feeling more like yourself. Your trip has utterly wearied you."

She did not insist upon his remaining, but watched him wistfully as he got into his coat, then handed him his hat herself.

"Good-bye," she said, her lip trembling piteously. "I have such a strange feeling in my heart, Ballard. I wish

you would put your arms closely about me—just once, dear. Hold me tightly and kiss me while I shut my eyes and try to fancy that it is real."

He looked at her curiously—hysteria was so foreign to her nature. What could it mean?

He took her in his arms and pressed her head tenderly upon his shoulder.

"What are you saying, little one?" he questioned, gently. "You are not at all like yourself. Should you have to shut your eyes to fancy my kisses real?"

She shook her head and tried to smile, but it was a very wintery effort. She disengaged herself from his arms and pushed him slightly from her. Even the palpable fraud that she had tried to put upon herself was a failure.

"I am tired," she answered, huskily. "That is all. When you return I shall be quite myself. You must think me very silly, dear, but I shall not distress you like this again. Go, now. Be sure you come to me early. Don't let anything detain you. I feel strangely nervous and—"

"Perhaps I had better not go at all."

"Yes; I had much rather you would."

He kissed her once with the tenderness of a brother, then the door closed upon him.

She went to the window and watched the tall, manly form until it had disappeared, scarcely able to control her sobbing. Then, when he was quite gone, she pulled herself up with a little shake.

"What fancies are these to which I am giving way?" she cried to herself, indignantly. "I might as well acknowledge it to myself. I am insulting my betrothed husband with the vilest suspicion that ever entered a woman's heart. I think I should stab the person who dared intimate so horrible a lie to me of him, and yet, in my own heart, I am doing him an injustice that his worst enemy would hesitate to put upon him. Oh, shame—shame!"

She walked quickly up and down the floor once or twice, then sat down and leaned her head dejectedly upon her hands. How long she had been so she was unable to say, when one of the servants entered.

"Mrs. Millbourne is here, Miss Kingman," he announced. "Will you see her?"

Geraldine sprung up. Here was some one who loved Ballard even as she did. A flush sprung to her cheeks. She was glad that Mrs. Millbourne had come, for, in spite of the secret that was burning in her breast of the existence of Mrs. Millbourne's child, they could talk of Ballard, and Mrs. Millbourne's perfect confidence would restore hers. She was ashamed of herself for the thought, and yet she hurriedly gave her servant permission to show her friend to the room.

And then?

She started back with a cry of alarm when she saw the ghastly features, the disordered appearance, of the woman who had been one of the neatest she had ever known. She did not speak, but stood there facing Carroll's mother, her hands pressed upon her breast, her breath coming in little pants.

The elder woman had paused, leaning in her exhaustion against the door. She waited but a moment, however, then closed the door and went slowly, in an almost spectral way, up to the girl who had loved her daughter.

"I have come to tell you something, Geraldine Kingman," she said, hoarsely. "For years you have been the best friend I have had—I and my family—perhaps the only one. I have loved you next to my own child, and with reason. I have often thought that if the time ever came when I had an opportunity of doing it, I would gladly lay down my life for you; and yet I am here to-day to strike you the most cruel blow that has ever come into your young life."

Still Miss Kingman did not speak. Her tongue seemed to

cleave to the roof of her mouth. She was incapable of word or movement. Seeing which, Mrs. Millbourne continued:

"I have come," she said, slowly, "to prove to you that he whom you love is the vilest scoundrel that ever disgraced the name of man."

The color surged from Miss Kingman's throat to brow.

"How dare you say that?" she exclaimed, her voice refusing to rise above a whisper, in her awful anger. "How dare you come to me with a wretched falsehood—"

"Wait! You could not believe in him more than I did. You could not trust him more than I have done. There is nothing that could have convinced me but the voice of the dead, proclaiming his guilt in a tone that would not be misunderstood. And as I have heard, so also shall you. There is the letter. Read!"

She held out that cruel letter in her hand, and Miss Kingman stood there, looking down upon it, but not daring to touch it. She seemed frozen into ice.

CHAPTER XXXI.

In her dimly lighted little room Carroll sat with her sleeping child upon her knee. She was not looking at the baby, but at the torn curtain that shaded the tiny window.

It did not require a second glance into the pale, haggard face to know that the reflections of that child-woman were far from pleasant. She was striving to make some plan of future action, without a ray of hope to build upon. The small supply of money that she had earned while with Mrs. Shannon was almost exhausted, and she knew that work must be done or her baby would starve. Yet what was there to do?

She knew that with that little incumbrance it was worse than useless for her to attempt the work of a servant; for even had she the strength to accomplish it, no one would

employ her, and she was trying very hard not to deceive herself in anything.

She could not teach, even had she the pupils, for her education was not of the kind that admits of that. There seemed absolutely nothing that she could do, look at it in whatever light she would. It was a dreary prospect, and it is not to be wondered at that her faint heart sunk in hopelessness and dread.

She lifted the baby and pressed its tiny face against her own.

"But for you, my darling, I could face it bravely enough," she whispered, sobbingly. "Without bread I should die, and that would be the end of all; but I can not see you suffer, my little Princess. I shall move heaven and earth to-morrow to find something for you and me, my pretty one. Oh, baby, baby! what a bitter world it has been for me, and will be for you, I fear!"

A slow tear trickled through her burning eyelids and fell upon the small face. It seemed to awaken the infant, and a low, hoarse wail issued through the little lips.

She tried to hush it with a little lullaby that was infinitely tender and soothing, but the child continued to cry fitfully, weakly.

She turned up the dim lamp and looked into the little face.

Was it fancy, or had there come a curious blue look about the tiny mouth, a pinched expression about the nose?

Her heart gave a great bound.

She looked more closely. There was no mistake. The horrible blue was spreading rapidly. The little form was growing rigid in her clasp.

A shrill scream issued from the lips of the young and inexperienced mother, then another and another, until without ceremony the door was thrown open and several women rushed into the room.

"What's the matter?" they demanded in chorus.

"My baby! She is dying!" Carroll gasped, lifting her white, horror-stricken face to that of the nearest woman. "For God's sake, do something for her! She is all I have in the world! You must not let her die!"

"Give her to me!" cried the eldest of the number. "She's got a spasm. It's not much. Quick, Jenny! Get me a tub of hot water—as hot as you can get it!"

Even as she spoke the woman was rapidly stripping the clothes from the now perfectly rigid little form. Carroll stood for a moment looking on in stunned agony, then without a word, without hat or wrap, she dashed out into the street.

With the speed of the wind she seemed to fly. On, on, never pausing for breath, she went, paying no heed to the persons who stopped to look at her in her rapid flight, straight to the hospital where the only friend upon whom she could then rely was to be found. She dashed by the man at the door before he could gainsay her, and ran half exhausted into the room of Dr. Winter.

He sprung up hastily at the sudden entrance.

"Mrs. Mills!" he exclaimed, "what in Heaven's name has happened?"

"My baby!" she gasped. "Quick, she is dying!"

He never remembered to have seen anything like the expression upon Carroll's face when she uttered those words. He started forward and placed his hand heavily upon her shoulder.

"Calm yourself!" he cried, hastily. "It may not be so bad as you think. What is the matter with her, and where have you left her?"

"At home! Oh, for God's sake, come! She may be dead already!"

"But can't you tell me something, so that I may know—"

"It is a spasm, some one said, but—"

"Oh, if that is all, there is not so much danger. Come!"

He picked up his hat and got into his coat as he was going toward the door. His buggy was at the street door, and he lifted her into it. There was not a word spoken on that rapid homeward drive, but by the set expression of those haggard eyes, Harry Winter knew how Carroll was suffering.

They were not long in reaching the little half tumbled-down house that Carroll called her home, and lifting her out carefully, he hurried with her into the room.

All that could have been done for the child had been done by the kind-hearted women, and very gradually it was recovering from the terrible rigidity, but there was an expression on Harry Winter's face as he held the little creature in his arms that caused the most experienced to shake their heads and glance apprehensively at Carroll.

She, however, saw only that the child was better, and a great thanksgiving filled her soul. She had scarcely realized before how great a part of her life that little child had become, but she knew it all now, and tears rolled over her face like rain as the reaction of hope came.

But it was piteously short-lived.

The baby looked at her—she even fancied it smiled in a weak sort of way—then the old pinched expression began to come again. The wild fear leaped once more into Carroll's heart, but she neither moved nor spoke, standing staring down at the blue lines in the little face as if she had become petrified.

Through all the long hours of the night Harry Winter worked over it faithfully, assisted by the good women, two of whom remained; but he seemed to know from the beginning that it was a hopeless endeavor. How patient and gentle he was! But it was all so useless. As morning broke, he rose and placed the little creature upon the bed.

Carroll crept up closely beside him and touched his arm.

"Is she—dead?" she whispered, hoarsely.

Winter put his arm tenderly about her shoulders.

"You must bear it bravely, poor little woman," he said, sorrowfully.

She did not seem to understand at first, looking at him in a dazed sort of way, then she saw some one press down the tiny eyelids.

Winter was looking down at her.

She did not cry out or moan, but a smile came over her stiff features.

She turned to the women present.

"You have been very good to her and to me, all of you," she said, with a calmness that was oppressive, "and I thank you more than I can say. But it is all over now. Will you not leave me alone with her?"

Dr. Winter shook her slightly.

"Child," he said, tenderly, "you must bear up under this as you should. Remember that you are not the only childless mother in the world. We must all yield to the will of Heaven. Would you call her back from the presence of God, even if you could?"

She seemed to be trying to consider for a moment, then she answered, still very quietly:

"No. I would not, even if I could."

There was a smile upon her face as she said the words, and Winter shivered.

He tried to speak some words of comfort and hope to her, but she stared at him as if his meaning were a blank, answering:

"You must not think that I am grieving. Why should I? She is at rest with God. Won't you leave me for just a little while?"

And they complied.

When she was alone with her dead, she knelt upon the floor and encircled the little form with her arms.

"Are you afraid, my darling, there in the darkness by

yourself?" she whispered. "It must be very lonely for you, my little Princess—very lonely. Wait, baby—wait, if you can, but a little while, and mamma will carry you in her arms through the darkness and the storm. You are too little to go alone, and God will forgive me now. There is nothing else to keep me—nothing at all! Every one will be better without me, and we shall be happy together up there with God, my little Princess. He has shown me the way at last! And they thought that I should regret it!"

She tenderly kissed the child again and again, but without passion, then arose from her knees.

There was neither haste nor hesitation in her manner. The smile that Harry Winter had seen upon her lips was still there.

With great deliberation she opened a drawer of a table that answered as bureau and wash-stand both, and took from it a small bottle, with the ominous skull and cross-bones prominently stamped upon the label. She held it for a moment between her and the light. It was almost full.

Once again she crossed to the side of the baby and leaned over to press her lips upon those already growing cold.

"Wait, darling!" she whispered. "Only a moment now!"

She took the stopper from the bottle, then quietly lifted it to her lips.

CHAPTER XXXII.

GERALDINE KINGMAN stood staring dumbly at Millicent Millbourne, a wild horror in her eyes that was indescribable. Had her hideous premonitions so soon proved to be a reality, then?

There was the letter in the woman's hand, the letter that she knew contained the truth that she so much feared to

hear. An icy perspiration stood upon her brow and about her set mouth. What should she do?

And then the indecision, the weakness of disbelief seemed to leave her, and the old defiance returned. She would not listen to the stories against this betrothed husband of hers, against whom she had not the right to hear. She drew herself up proudly and looked the suffering woman unflinchingly in the eye.

"I regret that you have done this!" she said, coldly. "I have always liked you. I have tried in every way that lay in my power to make your life a happier one. I have done what I could for you disinterestedly. There was no expected reward, no desire for one, but I did not expect such ingratitude. Leave my presence."

She loathed herself for her cruelty, her selfishness, when she saw the look of positive anguish that crossed Mrs. Millbourne's face. The poor woman drew back, her sensitive lip quivered, then a dogged determination blanched her already ghastly face.

"No!" she cried, "I can not go until I have proven to you that what I have said is the truth. You are too much my friend for me to allow you to sacrifice yourself in any way, and I can not do it, even if my punishment for speaking the truth is that I am never to see you again. You shall hear me!"

"I tell you that I will not! Do you think that I should accept your word in preference to that of my husband that is to be? Do you think that I should allow you to speak falsely of him to me?"

"I do not ask you to accept my word. I ask you to accept only the message that has come to me from the dead. I ask you only to listen to the words that Carroll herself has spoken."

There was a solemnity about the tone that was most impressive.

Miss Kingman shivered. For a moment she closed her

eyes as if to gain strength. Her hand was half extended as if she would take the letter, then dropped helplessly by her side. When she opened her eyes all her strength seemed to have vanished; but in its stead was a wild pleading that was infinitely piteous.

"Don't!" she cried, hoarsely. "You don't know what I am suffering. Have you never loved, that you can come here to me with this cruel story? I have tried to be your friend. Why could you not have let me have my little happiness in exchange?"

Tears came to Mrs. Millbourne's eyes.

"Oh, child, you don't know what you are saying!" she exclaimed, huskily. "You don't understand what the future would have brought you. Do you think it would have contained any happiness after you had discovered, as you would have been forced to do sooner or later, that you were married to a scoundrel? Do you think there would have been any happiness in discovering that the father of your children was the—"

"For the love of God, hush!" cried Miss Kingman, her teeth chattering violently together. "Do you think I am not suffering enough already? What is this thing that you would show me? Let me see!"

She held out her hand with an energy that seemed born of despair. She grasped the soiled paper, and trembling so that the lines were almost illegible, she read to the end, then she lifted her eyes to the face of that agonized mother. It was quivering with shame and anguish.

"Do you think that that has cost me nothing?" Mrs. Millbourne asked, in an almost inaudible voice. "Do you think that it was an easy thing for me to allow even you to suspect the shame that has come upon me? But my duty was crying aloud. The man whom you would marry has not only deceived you but her. He has driven her to her death. Do you think there is any happiness to be found with such as he? Do you not understand that that hideous

crime would stand between you forever and forever? Should you not see the agony of that betrayed girl every time that you glanced into his false face? Do you not know that it would poison every hour of your life until existence would become a curse?"

"But if I had not known."

The voice was so hoarse, so filled with anguish, that even Mrs. Millbourne started, and a little cry escaped her.

"Would you have wished that?" she asked, with dull horror. "Do you think that God would allow a crime like that to go unpunished, unavenged, always? Do you believe that it would have been possible for you to have gone all your life without knowing, and would you have wished it, even had it been possible? Oh, child, you do not know yourself! It is the horror that is upon you now, the hideous suffering in the death of your respect for the man whom you have loved. You would have discovered all some day, and then what would your agony have been like?"

And then Geraldine Kingman remembered her suspicions that were confirmed now. All those awful things that she had feared were true. Should she be able to face the years with that bitter knowledge of her husband's frightful guilt before her always? I wonder if any of us have ever confronted a more hideous experience.

She stood for some time in stony silence, unable to speak under the excess of her most cruel emotion; then, with the letter still in her hand, she said, brokenly:

"Will you leave me now? There is nothing more that you wish to tell me, is there?"

The question seemed to cut Mrs. Millbourne to the heart.

"No," she answered, heavily. "Heaven knows I wish I could have spared you this!"

"Please don't say anything more about it. You thought you were doing your duty, and you were. Of course, I shall see by and by that it was best; but you will under-

stand how hard it is just now. I don't want to be cruel, but—"

Her lips seemed to have grown too stiff for her to complete her sentence. Mrs. Millbourne did not approach a step nearer to her, but a great longing filled her eyes.

"You will learn to forgive me some day," she said, yearningly. "I have loved you next to my own child. When you have forgiven me, come to me or send for me. I shall know no contentment until you do so. Good-bye."

"Wait!"

The exclamation seemed to come mechanically, then Miss Kingman paused to recollect what she had desired to say. Memory seemed to return, after an uncomfortable pause.

"I wanted to ask you," she said, slowly, "to remain at home until you hear from me. I don't know what I shall want to say to you, but I should like to know that you will be there when I come."

"I shall be there."

"Forgive me if I have hurt you."

"Ah! it is I who should ask forgiveness, for it is I who have brought the pain."

"Never mind. We shall both stand it all the better the next time we meet. I am very wrong, but I have not meant to be cruel. Good-bye."

She did not offer her hand. There were many things that Mrs. Millbourne would have liked to have said, but her tongue seemed tied in face of the suffering that she but too readily read in that noble countenance.

"God bless and comfort you!" she whispered; then turned and walked unsteadily from the room.

The fire upon the hearth was growing low. Mechanically Miss Kingman walked over to it, and taking the brass poker from the rack, stirred the embers to a blaze. She sat down upon the rug where the warmth might reach her, but the very blood in her veins seemed stagnated.

Under the awful suffering that was paralyzing her she was trying to see her duty through inclination; but she was too honest a woman to deceive herself.

She loved Hilliard—had loved him all her life with the entire strength of a powerful nature—and she had never perhaps loved him before as she did at that moment. It is the pitiful contradiction of the human heart that it loves most that which it can not possess, and her yearning was exquisite agony.

"What shall I do?" she whispered again and again, without finding an answer to her own query—"what shall I do?"

Then there was a long period of silence, in which the torture seemed too great even to admit of thought. All the daylight had died away, and only the very fitful glow of the fire fell upon her, making the scene weird and spectral. Her face was bowed upon her knee, and then, with it buried there, a wild cry went up from her heart.

"Oh, my darling," she moaned, "I can not—can not give you up!"

There was an oppressive silence after that, broken at last by a light footfall in the hall, and an instant afterward the portière was lifted, and Ballard Hilliard stood there in comparative darkness.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Ballard Hilliard had called Miss Kingman's name twice, and still she had not heard. Fearing he dared not think what, he stooped over and lifted her in his arms. She uttered a feeble cry and shrunk away, but he placed her in a chair and knelt beside her. He would scarcely have recognized the drawn, haggard countenance that faced him.

He looked at her for some moments in stunned silence, then exclaimed:

"Good heavens, Jerry! what is it that has happened to you? Why have you deceived me? Why have you told me that there was nothing distressing you, and then allow me to return and find you like this? Speak to me, dear, and tell me this dreadful thing."

Could she doubt the earnestness of that handsome face? She groaned aloud as the memory of all she had suffered and was to suffer still came to her. She covered her eyes with her trembling hands and did not reply.

"Jerry!" Hilliard cried, "you are driving me half mad! Is it that you do not trust me that you refuse to speak? At least answer something!"

"What is there to say?" she asked, her voice unrecognizably hoarse; "and how shall I say it? Ballard, I have seen Mrs. Millbourne!"

She spoke those last words in an awful whisper, and was startled at his wondering reply:

"Well?"

"Is not that enough?"

"Enough for what?"

"Is it possible that you don't know? Or are you trying to deceive me further?"

"I don't in the very least understand you. When did you see Mrs. Millbourne?"

"Now—to-day."

"And what did she tell you?"

"Everything."

"But what is everything? You are speaking in enigmas to me, Jerry. I see you in this terrible state of excitement and grief, and the only explanation that you have to make to me is that Mrs. Millbourne has been here and told you everything. I am as much in the dark as before. Can you tell me nothing further?"

She was sitting bolt upright in the chair in which he had placed her, gazing through the faint light into his face with a strained look that was painful.

"Let me look at you!" she cried, heavily. "Let me look straight into your eyes, Ballard, and see if the man whom I have almost worshiped is capable of such deception as that! Let me—"

"Jerry, what is that you are saying?" cried Hilliard, haughtily. "In what have I ever deceived you? What is it that you mean?"

She lifted herself half off the chair and peered weirdly into his face.

"Ask yourself," she whispered. "Look back over all your life and see if there is not something in which you have deceived me. Think, Ballard!"

He flushed to the very roots of his hair, and she was not slow to see it, even in that dim light.

"I told you of the one time in all my life in which I deceived you—or, rather, as much of it as you would allow me to tell," he stammered. "But Mrs. Millbourne knows nothing of that. It is a subject that has never been mentioned between us."

Miss Kingman had fallen back in her chair. She remembered then that she had in reality forbidden him to speak to her upon that subject. Was it so much his fault, then? What was she to think? How was she to act? She moistened her parched lips, and endeavored to nerve herself to the hardest ordeal that she had ever been called upon to endure. Then, before she began, she arose and rang for lights.

Hilliard had never seen her like that before, but the change awed him. He watched her in silence until she sat down before him again, and he knew that the subject was opened.

"Ballard," she said, slowly, "I see now that I was wrong. I see that there should be no unexplained circumstances in the lives of those that expect to pass through years in the closest companionship that God allows to

mortals. But it is not too late, and I am ready to listen to you. Will you tell me all the truth?"

He was speechless for a moment, striving to decide in his own mind what had brought all this about; but, unable to discover any reason, he sat down and drew his chair opposite to hers. His countenance was contracted with pain.

"You mean the story of my—association with Carroll Millbourne?" he asked, heavily.

"Yes."

"I hoped that subject was buried between us forever," he said, wearily; "but it must be as you will. The greatest sorrow of my life surrounds that time. I have not endeavored to conceal that fact from you. Is it your wish that I should begin at the beginning and tell you a connected story?"

"Yes."

It seemed that she was unable to utter more than the monosyllable, and that in the shortest of gasps. Hilliard looked at her closely, then with eyes still fixed upon her face he began, speaking slowly, and striving after a calmness that cut her to the soul. For the first time she seemed really to realize what Carroll had been to him. He apparently forgot the presence of his promised wife as he proceeded with the story, but rambled on as if he were living in that past that had been so unspeakably sweet to him. He went on to the day when he had heard of her last, and as he concluded his head dropped upon his hands and an awful groan escaped him. He was suffering again as he had suffered in those days that were gone, and she knew it. She watched him in silence for some time, the sobs in her throat almost strangling her. Of all the grief that her life had ever known, that moment held the greatest. But it mastered her.

She rose at last and placed her hand upon his shoulder.

"Ballard," she said, gently, "have you told me—everything? Is there nothing more to add?"

He lifted his face, distorted with agony.

"I have told you all that I can," he answered, hoarsely.

"Why can you tell me nothing further?"

"I can not answer."

"Then let me answer for you. Read that!"

She placed the letter in his hands and walked to the other end of the room while he read. She was trying to think what she ought to do, trying to subdue the ghastly pain at her heart, but it was a useless endeavor. She returned and stood beside him, with her hand upon the back of his chair.

He lifted his ashen face.

"Well?" he said, hoarsely.

"Is that true, Ballard?"

"Yes."

There was a long silence. She did not know how foolishly she had hoped until then. A low cry, quickly suppressed, like that which follows a stab of pain, fell from her lips. Then the calmness of death came over her.

"Why did not you tell me?"

"Do you think that I ever should?" he inquired, hoarsely.

"But you meant to make her your wife?"

"Before Heaven—yes!"

"Did you--did you ever suspect the reason why—she went away, Ballard?"

"It was because she knew that I would never give her up, and because she was determined that she would not come between you and me."

A spasm contracted Miss Kingman's face. How much more noble, more self-sacrificing that child had been than she! She wanted to do everything then to make up for even the wrong of a momentary intention. She bent forward eagerly.

"But could you see no other reason?"

"No."

"Think, think, Ballard!"

He started up with a low cry of horror.

"You don't mean—"

"Yes, I do—yes."

"Good God!"

She never forgot the expression of his countenance then. There was almost insanity in it. She went up and soothingly placed her hand upon his shoulder.

"You must not excite yourself so!" she cried. "You must—"

But apparently he had not heard her.

"What a scoundrel I have been!" he gasped. "God in heaven! what punishment do I not deserve for the sorrow and shame that I brought into that poor child's life! I am more her murderer than if I had struck the blow that placed her in her coffin! Oh, Carroll! Carroll!"

She had never heard such grief expressed in the mere calling of a name. He concealed his face and sobbed horribly.

"Ballard!" she cried, heavily, "don't do that! It is not quite so bad as you think. I can not tell you yet, but— Come away with me now, to-night. There is something that must be done at once. I can not tell you yet, but—"

Her manner startled him even out of his terrible paroxysm of grief. He turned and caught her by the shoulders.

"What is it that you mean?" he cried. "For Heaven's sake, speak quickly! I am almost mad!"

She hesitated. She did not know how much she ought to tell him just then.

"Come with me to Philadelphia to-night," she said, pleadingly.

"For what?"

"Don't ask me. I can not tell you now, but you shall know to-morrow."

"I must know now—now!"

"Then— Be quiet, Ballard. You are trembling so, dear."

"But—"

"I think—mind you, Ballard, I don't say anything except that I think—but it may be that I have seen—your child!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

It was with a heavy heart that Harry Winter left Carroll alone in that room with her dead baby.

"Poor child!" he muttered. "There is little enough that any of us can do for her now. She may have erred, but there was never a woman who has been more cruelly punished. I never saw a purer or more innocent face. I am quite convinced that there has been some horrible mistake. I don't believe that she is guilty of the wrong that is ascribed to her. And how she suffers! She needs the tender sympathy of a woman. It is only a woman who would know how to speak the words that she needs to hear. But who is to speak them? If Miss Kingman were only— Why not send for her? She is only a little way off. I shall go for her myself. It can do no harm. She is so gentle, so tender, so womanly. I wonder that I did not think of it long ago. I shall go at once, early as it is."

To think with Dr. Winter was to act. He took his hat and crushed it down over his eyes, then walked hastily down the street. He paused before the handsome residence, and mounting the stoop, pulled the bell.

The servants were just beginning to move silently through the great house. One answered the summons.

"I want to see Miss Kingman," exclaimed Dr. Winter, who was known to the girl. "Don't disturb any one else in the house, but tell her— Wait—I will write a line upon my card."

He selected a card, then scribbled upon it:

"Will you come with me to see our little friend? She is in great distress and needs you. Will explain when I see you, but don't lose any time."

The girl took it.

Miss Kingman had left New York the night before with Ballard Hilliard, but not considering it either advisable or prudent to go to the hotel, had gone to the home of her friends. She sprung out of bed when she had read the note that the servant had aroused her to deliver, and dressed herself hurriedly for the street. She did not pause to greet Dr. Winter when she joined him, but asked:

"What is the matter? What has happened?"

"The child is dead!"

"Dead!" she gasped. "When?"

"A few minutes ago, of spasms. That poor child—I scarcely know what to think of her. I have never seen any one in such a state. She needs some woman friend, and I thought of you."

Miss Kingman did not reply. She had quite recovered herself, and hurried almost into a run down the street. Her thoughts were busy, but not a word did she speak upon that quick walk.

"Is she in here?" she asked, as she paused before the door that she knew led to Carroll's room.

"Yes."

She did not knock for admission, but opened it softly and entered.

A hoarse cry escaped her as the tableau met her eye.

The baby lay upon the bed, and by its side stood the frantic mother, with a half smile upon her lips, and that fatal bottle clasped in her hands. She had not heard the opening of the door, and lifted it to her lips as Geraldine Kingman entered.

With a single bound Miss Kingman had reached her.

She caught the hand that would have taken her life, and the bottle fell to the floor, smashing at Carroll's feet.

She looked from the spilled liquid to Miss Kingman's face almost vacantly.

"See what you have done!" she said, dully. "It is all gone now, and my little Princess can not wait much longer."

"What would you do?" gasped Miss Kingman. "Do you not know—"

She could not finish her sentence for the horror that was upon her. Carroll moaned.

"What shall I do?" she asked, helplessly. "What shall I do? Oh, why did you come? Why did you?"

Miss Kingman took the little figure in her arms and held her closely, as if she were a tiny, grieving child. All the nobility of her great nature was restored. She felt that she could never do enough to show her appreciation for the great sacrifice that girl had made for her. Her life would have seemed a small recompense at that moment.

"My darling!" she whispered, "what was it that you intended to do? Don't you know that that was wicked? Don't you know that God would have punished you through all eternity for taking that which is His? Don't you know that you would never have seen the face of your little one in the life that is to come? Is it not better to wait for a time, in order that you may be rejoined in that new life in which there is no death and no separation?"

Carroll drew back and gazed at her in silence for a time, then burst into tears. Miss Kingman let her weep without reproof until the tears had ceased to flow.

"It is so hard!" she moaned—"so hard! What is there in life to live for? How can I face all the dreadful years of torture alone?"

"But you will not face it alone, my darling," said Miss Kingman, tenderly. "There is one who loves you—who is waiting even now to ask your forgiveness for the great

wrong that he has done you. Do you think there will be no happiness for you, Carroll, in being Ballard Hilliard's wife?"

The haggard eyes were lifted. There was a moment of painful silence, then Carroll whispered:

"What is it that you mean?"

"That you are to be happy, my dearest, in spite of all your suffering. Ballard does not know yet that you live; but he is here in this town waiting for me to bring him to you—waiting to see his child."

Carroll shuddered.

"But you will not tell him? Remember that I hold your promise to tell no one—no one at all!"

"Would you keep a father from the sight of his dead child?"

Carroll drew back.

"What do you mean?" she whispered, hoarsely.

"That I know all—all the generous, noble sacrifice that you have made for me, and all the suffering that I have caused you, my darling! Oh, Carroll, could you not have understood that nothing under heaven could have induced me to come between you and the man who loved you? You will be Ballard's wife now, and—"

"No, no, no! You don't understand! I never could do that—never!"

"Why not?"

"Can't you see? You have been the best, the only friend we have ever known. Do you think that I would rob you of the man whom you love? Do you think I would take from you the man who for years has been your promised husband?"

"Not when you know that I never shall be his wife?"

"Not even then, because you love him!"

There was a resolution in the sad voice that Miss Kingman knew could not be shaken; but now that the two women had entered upon a contest of self-sacrifice, Miss

Kingman determined that nothing should stand between her and the end that she had in view. She felt that to see Ballard Hilliard and Carroll happy would in some measure expiate the sin that she had committed in thought if not in reality—the sin of separating those two who loved each other, and all her nature was aroused in the endeavor.

There was an anguish in the white face that Carroll was too heart-broken to see, but the voice was almost steady as she said, softly:

"But suppose that I should tell you that I do not love him?"

"I would not believe you," she said, quiveringly.

"But suppose I could prove it to you?"

"You could not do that," she said, miserably. "Oh, Miss Kingman! if you have any pity, don't torture me!"

"Do you know me so little that you think I could? I am going to prove to you that—Ballard Hilliard is—nothing to me!"

What it cost her to utter those words no one ever knew, but they were spoken quietly, almost cheerfully.

"How?" whispered Carroll.

"By showing you the gentleman whose wife I have promised to be."

There was a certain rigidity about the white lips that gave evidence of the woman's agony; but even that passed away as she opened the door and signaled Harry Winter, who still stood without, to enter.

He came at her silent call, and going forward, placed his hand upon Carroll's head. She gazed from one to the other in bewilderment.

"This is the gentleman of whom I was speaking," said Miss Kingman, with an imploring glance in Winter's direction. "Doctor Winter, will you not assure Carroll that I am your betrothed wife?"

The look of astonishment upon Winter's countenance gave place to one of deep pain. The eyes of both women

were upon him, the one in mute, terribly agitated inquiry, the other in pleading that he could not comprehend. What was he to say? His lips grew white as death as he replied:

"If it is your desire that I should do so, then I am ready."

Miss Kingman swayed for a moment, but recovered herself before Winter had reached her side. She smiled at him, but it was piteously weak. Then they both turned to Carroll, who had slipped from her chair and lay there upon the bare floor with a strangely white face.

"She has fainted!" exclaimed the doctor, as he lifted her in his arms and placed her upon the bed beside the dead infant.

"We must remove it before she recovers consciousness," said Miss Kingman, gently. "Poor, suffering, noble child! how we have all wronged her! There is a message that must be sent at once. Will you see that it is delivered?"

"Yes."

"May I have a leaf from your note-book?"

He gave her a prescription blank and a pencil, and she scribbled:

"DEAR BALLARD,—Come at once with messenger. Be prepared for a terrible shock. A great sorrow and a greater joy awaits you. Don't delay.

"GERALDINE."

With trembling hands she confided it to Dr. Winter, after holding it up for his inspection. He could not comprehend the situation, but he knew that it would be explained to him in time, and, leaving her there to await him, he went from the room with the message.

CHAPTER XXXV.

EARLY as it was when the messenger sent by Harry Winter to Ballard Hilliard's hotel arrived, the latter was already dressed, and was endeavoring to swallow a few morsels that had been set before him for breakfast.

The mysterious conduct of Geraldine Kingman the night before had prevented his sleeping. She had explained nothing; but he would have been more than obtuse not to have seen that there was something much beyond the ordinary in her concealed meaning. He scarcely dared attempt to guess what it all meant, and yet his heart told him that some great change had come into his life. Every sort of theory that the fanciful brain of man could invent he had considered as the explanation of her conduct, but each was as promptly rejected as conceived.

"I am allowing myself to hope for too much," he told himself again and again, striving to curb his own eagerness. "The reaction will be so great that it can not be endured when I find how I have really permitted my imagination to run riot over reason. Women are all sensational. Poor Jerry! How she has suffered through me! Ah, God! What happiness do I deserve? What grief have I not brought upon the two women that I would have given my life to protect from harm? How noble and generous they both have been, and how little I have deserved the love of either."

He leaned his head upon his hand and groaned as he looked down into his plate. He felt that he could not bear the uncertainty much longer, that he must demand some explanation from her, let the hour be what it might. He was rising from the breakfast-table with that determination well defined, when the messenger addressed him.

"You are Mr. Ballard Hilliard?"

"I am."

"There is a letter, and I am to take you with me as an answer."

There was no envelope upon it, and very hastily Hilliard cast his eye over the contents. A vivid flush rose to his brow, followed suddenly by a pallor that was alarming. What could it be that she meant? he asked himself. He did not pause to answer his own query, but hurried after the messenger.

"Is it far?" he asked.

"'Bout half a mile."

There was a coupé standing at the door of the hotel. Hilliard sprung in.

"Give the order to the coachman!" he cried to the boy, "and tell him to drive fast for double money!"

The boy obeyed, then sprung in and closed the door.

Under the tempting promise, the driver was not many minutes in reaching the address that had been given, and wondering greatly at the poverty of the surroundings to which Miss Kingman had summoned him, he leaped to the ground, and, ordering the coachman to wait, ran up the few steps.

The door was opened by Miss Kingman herself.

Her face was very pale, but there was a smile in her eyes for all that which reassured him. He caught her hand and pressed it with a force of which he was unaware.

"For God's sake, Jerry, don't keep me in suspense!" he exclaimed, huskily. "Tell me what is it you mean, and what has happened."

"But you must be calm first," cried Miss Kingman, her own voice trembling between a hysterical laugh and cry. "Everything depends upon your calmness."

"Don't, don't! The suspense is maddening!"

"But it is for her sake, Ballard!"

"Hers? Whose?"

"Carroll's!"

He staggered against the door. For a moment the frightful pallor of his face alarmed her, but the next a wild joy illumined his eyes, such as she had never seen expressed by any countenance.

"Carroll!" he whispered. "You could not be cruel enough to deceive me like that! Explain to me quickly, for the love of Heaven!"

A faintness, a giddiness oppressed Miss Kingman's heart, but it was but momentary; then all the old generous self-sacrifice returned. She put up her hand and touched his cheek caressingly.

"She is not dead, Ballard, as we all thought," she said, gently. "There was—a—a secret that she concealed even from you! It is a very sad time for Carroll, dear, in spite of the fact that she knows of the happiness that is in store for her, because—you must be very brave for her sake, Ballard, for Carroll has suffered even more than you think. Her—child is—dead!"

He did not speak. His pallid lips seemed incapable of articulation. He stood there staring at her helplessly for a long time, then in a dull, stupid sort of way he said, almost quietly:

"Take me to her."

She turned away and opened the door. Then she closed it again behind him, and he was alone with the woman who had been the one love of his life.

She was lying upon the bed with her head propped up with pillows, her great hollow, haggard eyes fixed upon the door. That same bleak despair that had characterized her expression was still there; but as she recognized the figure that had come through the door she tried to raise herself. The effort was too great. She flung out her arms, the low gasping cry reaching only him, and the next moment she was in his arms, pressed closely to his madly beating heart.

There were no words between them. They were both

weeping, their tears mingling as their lips met and clung together. Then when their agitation had been somewhat controlled, Hilliard whispered brokenly:

"My love, my wife, how we have both suffered!"

"God never yet let a sin go unpunished, Ballard," she faltered. "We have no right to complain. Have they told you—"

She could not finish the sentence; but he knew from the grief in the sweet eyes that she referred to the death of her baby. He drew her closer to him and held her lips to his cheek.

"Not all, darling, but enough to make me understand what a curse I have been to your pure life. Can you ever forgive me, Carroll?"

"I told you long ago that there must be no talk of that between us. God has forgiven, and He has sent the sweet signal of pardon in you. Oh, my love, my love! I could not have borne life longer without you. The burden had grown too great. I have been a terrible coward. I could not even hope when they told me that you were coming. I can scarcely believe that you are here now, though I feel the throb of your heart against my own."

"But it is all true, my little Princess."

She started. The old sweet name had brought back the memory of her great loss to her. She tried to rise, but he was forced to lift her.

"What is it, sweetheart?" he whispered.

"We must go to—her! Oh, Ballard, if you could only have seen her once in life I might have been content!"

"Hush, love! We must not question the will of God. Are you strong enough to bear it?"

"Yes."

He lifted her from the bed and supported her with his strong arm. She was very frail, very weak, and his heart ached as he saw the terrible changes in her that suffering had wrought; but she was even more beautiful to him than

ever, and it seemed to him that, much as he had loved her in the old time, he had not known the meaning of love till now.

She indicated the way, and he half carried her to the room in which she knew they had placed the little form that they were so soon to lose forever.

They had placed it upon a little cot, and together that father and mother knelt beside the body of their child.

When the first grief had subsided, Hilliard rose and took the little dead thing in his arms, holding his baby for the first time to his breast. Very tenderly he brushed the soft golden hair back from the delicate brow and pressed his lips upon the tiny mouth, murmuring unheard words of love.

Carroll sat there upon the floor with her great, grief-stricken eyes fixed upon them, thinking what a radiant joy it would have been had that tender heart but known that it was her father who held her, that it was her father who whispered those precious words. A quivering sob escaped her, and laying the tiny thing gently back upon the couch, Hilliard lifted Carroll and took her to the room that they had left.

"It is very bitter, darling," he whispered; "but God knows best. The world would have been very cruel to her, dear heart, because of the sin of her father. You must remember that, and understand that it is best for her sake."

But in the first wild grief a mother never can see the justice in the sacrifice.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THERE was a long consultation half an hour later between Ballard Hilliard and Geraldine Kingman. Carroll was present, but she took no part in it, lying quietly upon the bed with her hand clasped tenderly in his. If there

was a pang of jealousy in Miss Kingman's heart, it was carefully concealed, and her countenance was as clear as an unclouded sky as she talked.

If Hilliard wondered at this, he was too wise a man to speak. Naturally he had not forgotten her grief of the night before, but it seemed to him then that it was more mourning for the shattering of an ideal than suffering over the blow dealt her love. The thought comforted him, and he preserved it.

"You wish my advice as to what is best to do?" she asked, with a smile.

"Yes," he answered, gratefully. "We owe so much to you that—"

"Hush! You owe me nothing. I have cost you a year of suffering the most intense, and it seems to me now that I can never do enough to erase it. But we will let that go. I thank Heaven that I was the innocent rather than the guilty cause. Now here is my plan. If you don't like it, don't hesitate to say so."

"It is sure to be the best and most generous."

"Wait until you have heard before you judge. There is no reason why any one should know the truth of this."

"I understand," said Hilliard, an expression of shame coming to his countenance.

She hurried on:

"And—and I think it is your desire as well as mine that it should be upon the arm of her husband that Carroll leans when she stands for the last time before that child whom she so loved."

Hilliard looked his gratitude.

"You know," continued Miss Kingman, "that the baby can not be buried from here. We will take it to New York and have the ceremony from my house. Before we have reached the house we will visit a clergyman who is a friend of mine, and to whom I shall telegraph in advance, and you can be quietly married in his office on your

way up from the train. There need be no one present except myself and some member of the minister's household who never saw you and will never hear of you again. In that way I am quite sure that we can keep the matter confined to those who already know, and they are sufficiently interested in Carroll to wish to be silent for her sake. In fact, I see no reason why even they should know the real truth. If you will let me tell the story to Harry Winter and to Russell Shannon, there is no reason why I could not arrange it satisfactorily with little trouble. Do you agree?"

"Nothing could be better. I don't see how we are to thank you for the kindness that you are showing us, Jerry. I have deserved it very little."

"We were not to mention that subject again, I thought."

"But how can one be silent?"

"Do you think that I should not be interested after all these years of brotherly and sisterly affection?" she asked, half averting her face.

"It sounds so strange to hear you say that," exclaimed Carroll, softly. "It does not seem possible that all this hideous suffering has been a mistake—that it was useless from the beginning. Just to think, Ballard! I thought she loved you, and it was dear, generous, great-hearted Doctor Winter all the time! She is his betrothed wife, and, oh, I do pray God that you may be happy as you deserve, Miss Kingman!"

She observed the strange flush that had arisen to Miss Kingman's face, but did not construe it aright. Hilliard had straightened up.

"Betrothed to Winter, you say?" he almost gasped.

There was a slight pause of embarrassment, then Miss Kingman answered, quietly:

"Yes. It has been a very great mistake, Ballard, all around. I am engaged to Harry."

It was not an easy announcement for her to make. Her very soul seemed to contract under the pain of it, but she

was repaid for her sacrifice when she saw the expression of gladness upon Hilliard's face.

He sprung up, and catching her about the waist, kissed her upon the lips.

"Thank God, Jerry!" he cried, brokenly. "There is nothing that could have given me greater happiness than this. You have been the good angel of my life."

"No, the Nemesis, Ballard. But for me you might have been happy months ago. Let me go now, dear. Remember that I have all the arrangements to make, and there is no time to be lost if we are to leave for New York to-night."

She left them after that, and they watched her go as they might have watched an angel. Hilliard suspected more than he cared to acknowledge even to himself, but there could be nothing done, and repining now was useless. He was alone with the single love of his entire life, and in spite of the terrible grief that was upon them in the first hours of their reunion, he was happy.

It was in the afternoon of the same day that Dr. Winter entered the room where Miss Kingman stood with the undertaker. The latter was upon the point of leaving, and took his departure soon after. Then she turned to Winter.

"You should have gone to your room to rest after leaving the hospital, instead of coming here," she said, gently. "You are sadly in need of it."

"Do you think I could rest until I had seen you?" he said, with an unsuccessful effort to conceal his agitation. "I think this day has been filled with the greatest unrest that I have ever known. There has seemed a week in each hour."

Miss Kingman's face was slowly alternating from white to crimson. Her hands were trembling, and her lips almost refused to do her bidding as she tried to speak

calmly, avoiding the subject to which she knew he referred.

"It has been a long day, hasn't it?" she asked. "But then there has been so much to do—so much to hear. What would you think if I should tell you that there was a secret marriage long ago between Ballard Hilliard and Carroll?"

"I should call him no less a contemptible scoundrel than I think him now!" answered Winter, with energy.

"You must not say that—indeed you must not, for there is no man who deserves it less than Ballard. The circumstances that have surrounded him have been the most unfortunate, that is all. I can not explain them to you, but when I tell you that I am more than satisfied you will understand that you have misjudged him, will you not?"

But in spite of her pleading, Winter was not quite convinced.

"Yet he was engaged to you when he had a wife!" he said, heavily.

"He thought her dead. The person whom we all believed to be Carroll lies in Woodlawn, where Ballard and I stood side by side to see her buried. He never concealed his love for her from me. There was no deception. I knew that he never loved me. He has suffered as men rarely do. Don't become a Pharisee! Judge nothing that you do not understand. I am not at liberty to tell you secrets that are not my own, but you will try to believe, will you not?"

"I am willing to accept whatever you say is right, because I am utterly in the dark. They have their own reasons, I suppose, for wishing to conceal these things, and I have neither the desire nor the right to pry into them. But there is one part of it which concerns me very closely, and it is upon that point that I have come to you to-day.

Geraldine, what was it that you meant by making the announcement to—shall I say Mrs. Hilliard?—that you did?"

He paused and looked down upon her, but her eyes were upon the floor, and she did not reply. Her breathing was not quite regular. He understood her embarrassment clearly enough, and took her hand soothingly, tenderly, not quite concealing his own emotions, but succeeding in remaining very quiet.

"I asked you only a little while ago to be my wife, and you declined," he said, slowly. "Have you reconsidered your answer? Are you willing to trust me with your future, Jerry?"

She bravely lifted her eyes to his face.

"The situation is a most distressing one, Harry," she answered, hesitatingly. "I am afraid that I have taken a most contemptible advantage of you, and you have the right to withdraw from it if you so desire. The announcement that I made was an impulse in which you were not considered. I see how wrong it was. I wish you would not take that into consideration at all, Harry. I wish that you would forget that I have said that."

"I don't think I quite comprehend you. Is it that you wish to withdraw from the unconsidered engagement?"

She did not reply; but again her eyes were cast upon the floor.

A sudden flush dyed Winter's face.

"Very well!" he cried, passionately. "So be it. Let us forget all the past. Jerry, will you be my wife? You know that I love you—you know that I always shall. What is your answer?"

There were tears in her eyes as she lifted them gratefully.

"You are so good, so generous!" she cried, brokenly. "Let me be thoroughly honest, if I can. It is too soon yet, Harry, to talk about forgetting the past. I have told you before, and I told the truth. I have no right to tell

you that it was all a mistake, for that would be a cruel falsehood. But are you willing to trust me, Harry? Are you willing to wait?"

"As Jacob did for Rachel."

"Then I will be your wife, Harry."

There was no great demonstration upon either side. He kissed her forehead quietly and pressed her hand. The undertaker came to her for some instructions, and she left her betrothed husband to give them.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THERE was a quiet wedding in a little parsonage the same evening, in New York, at which only the contracting parties, the clergyman, Miss Kingman, and a person who signed his name Harris Hemingway were present. The last named rather objected, after the old-fashioned idea, to seeing a woman married in black; but Miss Kingman felt sure that that would never affect the happiness of Ballard Hilliard's young wife, and so expressed herself.

They were driven immediately after the ceremony to Miss Kingman's residence, when Hilliard himself insisted upon going after Mrs. Millbourne. Miss Kingman offered to go, but Hilliard would not listen to that, and, taking the same carriage that had brought them, he drove to the old tenement that was to be Millicent Millbourne's home no longer.

What occurred there no one ever knew, but Hilliard told Carroll afterward that he had spoken only the truth to her mother. Certain it was that she went back with him to the residence of Miss Kingman. No one saw her meeting with her daughter, and no one asked what took place, but it was upon the arm of her son-in-law that she leaned when she looked for the first and last time upon the face of her granddaughter.

It was a most pathetic picture, but one in which all saw

great happiness in the perspective, in spite of the shadow upon it then.

The funeral occurred, with strict privacy, next day, the little form being placed by that other one in Woodlawn over whom they had wept such bitter tears.

The story of the private marriage, the subsequent misunderstanding, and the supposed death were told to Mrs. Shannon and Russell, also to all those who had known Carroll during that wretched time, and if there were any doubts upon the subject, those most interested never knew.

Mrs. Millbourne was established shortly after that in a house that was the property of Ballard Hilliard, and, after being sure of her perfect comfort, he and his wife started away for a tour about the world that was to last for several months. It was rather difficult for Mrs. Millbourne to lose her daughter so soon after her recovery; but then she knew that it was wisest and best, and said nothing but words of encouragement when the plan was proposed by Hilliard.

During the hours of leisure and comfort of mind and body that followed, Mrs. Millbourne made the translation of the novel that Hilliard had brought her upon that night that she had known the greatest sorrow of her life. It proved to be the forerunner of what was afterward a wonderful success in the line of translations. An original novel was added later on in life, and from it to-day her name stands enrolled most brilliantly prominent in the archives of literature.

It was not long after the departure of Mr. and Mrs. Hilliard that the father of Miss Kingman died. There had been an unusual attachment between the two, and life was exceedingly lonely to her. It was during one of his visits to New York that Harry Winter observed the emptiness of her life, and, while he had resolved never to urge her to become his wife, but to allow her to take her own

time, he could bear it no longer, and broke the pledge he had made himself.

He urged upon her only the companionship of which she was standing so much in need, and she accepted it. He went back to Philadelphia, resigned his position there, and, with very little preparation, there was another wedding.

Hilliard and Carroll were still absent, which was as Miss Kingman would have desired.

Then they, too, went abroad, remaining for more than a year. The companionship was close enough, but a wedding like that is a most dangerous thing, a fact which Geraldine realized painfully after marriage. She hesitated to go to her husband, who was nothing more than her brother, after all, with any of the affairs that concerned her, lest he misunderstand or misconstrue her. It was the silence which he misunderstood, and a coldness, a formality sprung up between them that effectually froze the sweet intimacy of the marriage tie.

They neither had the courage to propose a return home, and a time of as great misery as either had ever known had come upon them. Winter was all that she could have desired, in so far as his attentions were concerned, but they were the attentions of the courteous stranger, and not the lover.

Woman-like, the great change, which was constantly growing, cut her to the heart, and she began to yearn for the little demonstrations that he had shown her at first. From the small acknowledgment to her own heart, to the ultimate realization that she was passionately in love with him, was the work of months, and months of thorough unhappiness to them both.

They were in a far distant land upon the anniversary of their marriage, but the memories that the day brought were not mentioned between them when the evening came. They were seated in the same room, Winter pretending to

read, and his wife gazing from a window at something which she could not see, when the silence and the yearning grew too great to be borne. She rose suddenly with an energy that was born of despair, intending to end all then and there, but the sight of his emotionless face stopped her.

The sudden movement, the start, the stop attracted him. He glanced up. The intense emotion in that usually impassive face startled him. He laid his paper aside and arose.

"What is it, Geraldine?" he asked, quietly. "Are you not well?"

The sound of the voice loosened all the flood-gates of her misery.

"No," she cried, "I am not well! I want to go home. Why do you not take me? It is all too utterly wretched to be borne longer. I tell you that I shall die under it! Take me home, and I promise you that you shall never be distressed again with the sight of a face that has grown hateful to you!"

"Geraldine!"

"Let me finish while I can. I know that I did wrong to almost force you into that engagement with me, and I have received nothing that I have not deserved, but surely it is enough. I can't tell you how I have suffered—how I am suffering! Oh, Harry, take me home! I will keep my word to you, let the cost be what it may!"

He was upon his feet. There was grief and shame blended in his expression. He took her hand and very gently forced her into a seat. Once or twice he walked up and down the floor to regain his composure, listening to the sound of her convulsive weeping; then he returned and stood with his hand upon the back of her chair, looking sadly down upon her.

"Jerry," he said, softly, calling her by the old name for the first time in months, "I can not tell you what this has

cost me. I have seen for some time how utterly miserable you have been, and I wanted to suggest that we return home, but I did not know how to frame the suggestion in a way that you would not misunderstand. God knows, if I had ever guessed that our marriage was to end in this way, I would have sacrificed my life before forcing it upon you as I did. I deluded myself into the belief that I could win your love, when I see now that I was taking the shortest way to make you despise me. I wish I could make you understand my position. I wish I could make you see how bitterly I regret the past, but that is impossible. It is but natural that you should have only the hardest, most cruel thoughts of me, and when I try to say anything to convince you that I am not the creature you have imagined me, my tongue seems tied, and I can say nothing."

Her tears had ceased, and she was staring up at him with an astonishment which he could not translate.

She turned in her chair and put her hand upon his. His fingers closed spasmodically over her own.

"What are you saying, Harry?" she asked, in a queer tone. "Do you mean that you are so blind that you think still that I do not love you?"

A boyish flush leaped to his brow.

"Don't torture me!" he said, little above a whisper. "You know that the one passion of my life has been given to you, and—"

"That it died?"

She almost held her breath for his reply to her half assertion, half interrogation.

"Died!" he ejaculated, hoarsely. "When? I don't want to trouble you with my feelings, but yet neither would I have you believe that which is so untrue. I don't ask for anything in return now, because I see that it is so cruelly impossible, but I have never loved you as I do at this moment."

She was upon her feet before him, and a single exclamation had fallen from her lips. It was:

"Oh, Harry!"

But there was such a world of expression in it that he peered into her face with a curious start; then, when he had seen, he caught her hand in a grasp that was painful.

"Speak to me quickly!" he gasped. "What is it that you mean? This is exquisite torture, so don't keep me in suspense!"

"We have been so blind," she said. "Do you think that God always darkens a life that He shadows? Oh, Harry, I have believed that you had grown to despise me, and it almost broke my heart, because I love you!"

"My wife!"

* * * * * * *

There is little left to tell.

During their voyage home there was another heir born to the Hilliard estate—another girl, called this time Geraldine Kingman Hilliard, and a right welcome addition she is to the household, the spoiled idol of her fond grandmamma. It is a joyous reunion, in which there is no shadow of regret upon the part of any one, and Harry Winter is not the last to realize that happy fact.

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